CAN WE DO BETTER?
AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON FROM GOVERNMENT EXPECTATIONS TO TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL READINESS AND CURRICULA FOR SIX-YEAR-OLDS WITHIN ENGLAND AND FINLAND

UNIVERSITY OF
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Päivi Hannele Valtonen

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Abstract

The curriculum of any given country is generally acknowledged as an important factor in promoting the transfer of information considered to be essential to the ability of that society to function as intended. In democratic societies the curriculum of the nation is viewed as promoting knowledge crucial to maintaining the democracy and encouraging the success of its citizens. Relatedly, the impact of the curriculum is further recognised as affecting the welfare and economy of any given culture.

The government of England, and the government of Finland, in conjunction with their respective educational departments (England: Department for Education, DfE, 2013; Finland: Finnish National Board for Education, FNBE, 2016) have recently reformed their respective national curricula. As regards six-year-olds the curriculum requirements of these two countries differ significantly. England maintains a subject-based curriculum and a national testing system, whereas Finland has initiated an operationally based curriculum stressing the importance of phenomenon-based learning by doing and exploring.

This study examines how Finnish pre-school and English primary school teachers perceive the joint effects of recently reformed curricula, pedagogy and children's school readiness.

The study encompassed 17 English primary school teachers and 20 Finnish pre-school teachers and obtained data by means of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Responses from both participant groups were synthesised qualitatively using a thematic approach in order to examine how teachers view their country's current curriculum and educational practices with respect to supporting six-year-old children's learning.

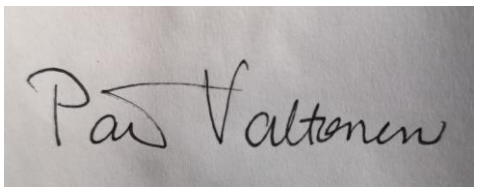
The study revealed that teachers in both countries had similar views as to school readiness expectations. Further findings indicated that the differing curricula had a strong influence on the pedagogical practices employed. Thus, teachers'

curriculum-based expectations for the attainment and academic accomplishment of six-year-olds are considerably higher in England than in Finland. However, the interviews also revealed a clear sense that these high expectations were a cause for uneasiness amongst English teachers. This uneasiness was primarily related to age-related demands, testing, and underachieving children. English teachers expressed concerns that the current curriculum is overly demanding, disengages the children, diminishes their creativity and possibly affects their mental health. National testing and high curriculum targets were viewed as the main causes for the above. Finnish teachers generally expressed favourable opinions of their new curriculum. Participants felt the pedagogy employed was helping them to promote children's 'learning to learn', including their self-regulation skills, and making children school ready through play-based education continuing up to the age of seven. The most frequently mentioned reasons for this general approval were the government's trust in teachers and the freedom to create, in conjunction with children and guardians, their own local curriculum and learning targets free of accountability or national testing for specific academic targets.

Keywords: curricula, school readiness, play-based pedagogy, academic targets, national testing, quality, six-year-olds, pre-school, primary school, teachers

Declaration

I, Päivi Hannele Valtonen, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *Can we do better? An international comparison from government expectations to teacher perceptions of school readiness and curricula for six-year-olds within England and Finland* is no more than 80,000 words in length including quotes, exclusive of tables and figures, but excluding appendices and references. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.



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"What do you say (what do you say)
Will the human race be run in a day (in a day)
Or will someone save this planet we're playing on
Is it the only one (what are we going to do?)"
-Paul McCartney-

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Abbreviations and Definitions

DfE: Department for Education (in England)

EARLY YEARS / EARLY CHILDHOOD: From birth to 8 years old

ECE: Early Childhood Education

EDUFI: Finnish National Board of Education

EYFS: Early Years Foundation Stage (in England)

FREE PLAY: "…is described by Play England as: … children choosing what they want to do, how they want to do it and when to stop and try something else. Free play has no external goals set by adults and has no adult-imposed curriculum. Although adults usually provide the space and resources for free play and might be involved, the child takes the lead and the adults respond to cues from the child." (Santer et al., 2007, xi)

NAEYC: The US National Association for the Education of Young Children

OECD: The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OFSTED: The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

PACEY: The Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years

PHENOMENON-BASED LEARNING (PhenoBL): "Holistic real-world phenomena provide the starting point for learning. The phenomena are studied as complete entities, in their real context, and the information and skills related to them are studied by crossing the boundaries between subjects." (Silander, 2015, 16)

PIRLS: The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study is an international comparative assessment that measures student learning in reading. PIRLS assess and compare the reading performance of pupils in their fourth year of formal schooling when around ten years of age.

Schoolification: Early years settings adopting practices that are usually more related to primary school

SPaG: Spelling, punctuation and grammar. Used by the Department for Education to refer to the set of grammar and spelling rules on which primary school children in England are tested.

STA: Standards and Testing Agency

STAKES: Sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollon tutkimus- ja kehittämiskeskus / National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health

THL: Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos, National Institute for Health and Welfare (in Finland)

UNICEF: The United Nations Children's Fund

ZPD: Zone of Proximal Development, a concept developed by psychologist Lev Vygotsky. ZPD is understood as the distance between a child's personal skills and the activities possible with more competent guidance.

Chapter I - Introduction

Recent curricula reforms have raised a growing concern that young children are facing ever increasing academic requirements at a younger age including increased teacher-directed pedagogies (Pyle and Danniels, 2017, 274; Ring et al., 2017; Brogaard Clausen, 2015, 365; Ashiabi, 2007, 205). Yet, there is no conclusive evidence that raised curricula demands benefit children in the future. The starting point for this research were my concerns towards children's well-being and current curricula and how these are practised – or not practised - with young children. These concerns grew into the research which I will present here. Education, training and personal experience in varying pre- and primary school settings in England and Finland have heightened my interest in examining how young children can be most effectively educated.

Current governments worldwide are struggling to find a way to connect the present curriculum in a meaningful manner to young students (Frank et al., 2014, 31). As an early education teacher, I have observed the essential enjoyment and discovery when a child learns a new skill or comprehends knowledge. I believe that if the educator cannot create this inner desire for learning in the children and help to maintain it, they might possibly become inattentive and disengaged with their education. According to Todd (2016, 621), some governments have increased: "Regulation and measurement of 'skills' and 'competences' for students…to suture over these transitions...because of the unpredictable future." Todd (2016, 626) warns that if education is seen only as, "what education can 'do' for the economy and society", it will therefore "…alienate and dehumanize students" and turn "...classrooms into testing zones and places of high-risk assessment that pigeonhole students into limited futures" (Todd, 2016, 621).

Furthermore, Pinar (2019, 4) notes that educators do not have formal control over their curriculum and regularly teachers are made accountable for the pupils' educational accomplishments rather than pupils themselves. According to Pinar (2019, 4) education should be viewed as "an opportunity offered: *no one* – not

parents, nor teachers – can guarantee that students will take advantage of it." Politicians might not acknowledge that it is challenging for young children to realise what is at stake in their learning opportunities (Pinar, 2019, 4). Therefore, I propose that young children's curriculum ought to comprise developmentally age-related opportunities which engage pupils in lifelong learning in developmentally coherent manners.

I note that despite a number of governments' interventions (e.g. free childcare places, universal credit, reformed curricula) one needs to recognise that these aspects alone do not guarantee the best outcomes for all children and relatedly the child's "successful" school years include the individual's subjective cultural experiences of education as well as the competence to manage their own other immediate varying factors: e.g. self-motivation, families' socio-economic factors, and 'good parenting'. It is also worth considering that where one education system seems to be successful, it might not logically follow that it will be successful in another country.

Therefore, the *aim of this study is not to find the ultimate truth on how to enhance children's curricula but rather provoke all parties involved in education* to rethink how young children's education is offered and what could be learnt from these two different contexts. It could be asked what makes a happy, balanced childhood and what are the appropriate practices on the way to achieve this?

Early childhood development (ECD) is typically defined as the time period between 0-8 years old by World Health Organization (2020). Therefore, this research examines the existing literature and secondary research mainly in this age group, reflecting the topic of the study. Furthermore, early childhood can be viewed from a multitude of perspectives and, as expected, these perspectives are "*culturally influenced"* and can change over time (Waller, 2009, 5). Additionally, the rights and needs of children are also connected with the cultural context. Thus, the complexity and intricacy of the topic, must be reiterated, especially, in comparison between any countries.

1.1 Background and Research Environment

To better and improve children's lives, policymakers globally have invested significantly in early years' research and funding over the past two decades (LoCasale-Crouch, 2007, 3; National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) (2017). One of the most significant current discussions are curricula reforms. In the new global economy, curricula have become a central issue for governments' agendas, emerging to hold their highest interest (Magnuson et al., 2007a; Crawford and Greaves, 2013; Aliprantis, 2014; Datar and Gottfried, 2015; Pinar, 2019). It is proposed that part of the English government's reasons is exemplified by the report: 'Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings,' which details increased outcomes for children, including savings for taxpayers (Allan, 2011), and therefore possibly pursuing the economical advances leading to an employable workforce (Wienclaw, 2013, 1). According to Roberts-Holmes (2015, 302), the present educational policy regulations and assessment practices are justified by a global education 'race'. Moreover 'the global education race' forces teachers to produce 'appropriate' test data which affects teachers' child centred pedagogical values in favour of test-driven cognitive skills and knowledge (Roberts-Holmes, 2015, 302-303). While the global pressure of the social and economic changes, it will impact and transform early childhood policy and schools' curricula, including practices and teachers' approaches to pedagogy (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAYEC, 1995; Samuels, 2015; Bassok et al., 2016; Pinar, 2019, 21).

The Department for Education (DfE, 2013a) in England and the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) (2016) in Finland have reformed their curricula recently. However, English and Finnish policy makers have responded to pressures of global competition in very different ways. In England, children start their formal education at the age of five. The National Curriculum (DfE, 2015) stipulates the outline of the core information for teachers to follow. Pupils' programmes of study are based on subject content. The main aim for education is to prepare pupils for a better life after school (DfE, 2013a).

In Finland, children start their pre-school at the age of six and formal school at the age of seven (Basic Education Act 628/1998). The curriculum's main aim for six-year-olds is to offer a flexible continuum from early years to school (FNBE, 2016, 81). The curriculum supports the operational culture that encourages children's growth and emphasises them to be active learners (FNBE, 2016, 27). In Finland young children's educational pedagogy is strongly based on the value of play.

Such rapid curricular changes have a detrimental effect on teachers, and more particularly on children, when curricular content is too narrowly interpreted. Sherrod (2002, 2) indicates that *the developmental needs* of a young child should be *the main factor* driving changes in the early education of children. Offering these learning conditions for young children is ideal. The benefits of high-quality early learning opportunities can improve and promote young children's attainments and school readiness (St. Clair-Christman et al., 2011; Lamy, 2013, 33). On the other hand, contemporary research has provided evidence of a so called, "trickledown effect" (Bassok et al., 2016, 1). For example, in the United States, Bassok, et al. (2016, 1) compared changes in public school kindergarten classrooms between 1998 and 2010 using two large, nationally representative datasets. After the study the researchers noticed that accountability pressures have trickled down into the early elementary grades. Therefore, applying the term "trickledown effect" (Bassok et al., 2016, 1). Consequently, very young children are going through more challenging academic curricula and possibly missing their play opportunities (Miller and Almon, 2009, 42; Claessens et al., 2014, 404; Brogaard Clausen, 2015, 365; Bassok et al., 2016, 1). Therefore, increasingly younger children are moving in the direction of more formal schooling which may cause difficulties later in their life (Wrigley, 2015, 8).

For example, it has been suggested by Wrigley (2015, 8), that the expectations in the English National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) are presented at too high level and will produce a sense of failure including profound damage to the self-image and learning dispositions of a generation of children. Furthermore, Wrigley (2015, 8) detects that:

> “Stringent premature targets have been set in an attempt to outdo potential competitors, with many demands placed on children a year or two younger and expecting them to cover subjects up to two years earlier than their peers in the highest achieving countries in the world.” Wrigley (2015, 8)

Wrigley’s quotation identifies an interesting viewpoint on how high curriculum targets can place inappropriate pressure on young children and their development. This quotation also includes reference to the Finnish curriculum which: “Are not intended to idealise it, but to demonstrate that high standards are perfectly compatible with enlightened educational values” (Wrigley, 2015, 3). This will be discussed further in the literature review, and the findings and discussion section.

Instead of the authoritarian pedagogies, Taylor, et al. (2013) proposed that for a child to achieve the highest educational attainments, a holistic approach should be applied in their education. Therefore, when children are offered developmentally appropriate learning opportunities, the effectiveness of the curriculum is optimised (Santer et al., 2007). Increasingly, developmental scientists agree that there are ways to meaningfully engage young children in literacy and mathematics and that the effectiveness of such efforts depends on the pedagogical approach, the quality of teaching, and the connection of the instruction to young children’s curiosity (Snow and Pizzolongo, 2014, n/a).

In England, the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013b) suggests that teachers are welcome to apply their own judgement on how to teach children in their classroom. The new National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) allows the teachers to take a greater role in planning, developing and implementing exciting and stimulating lessons (Sewell et al., 2018). Therefore, educators could practise a holistic approach, such as, including play-based pedagogy in Year 2 and offer the children opportunities to make independent choices about their own learning experiences. In reality, the majority of the subjects are covered applying the formal approach and play appears to be experienced as a luxury (Elkind, 2008b, 15). The English curriculum promises freedom to teach without restrictions.

However, the stipulated curriculum topics, objectives and testing constrain teachers' practices and therefore possibly limits their pedagogical autonomy.

As stated earlier, the developmental needs of young children ought to be the main factor when reforming young children's curricula (Sherrod, 2002, 2). Therefore, curricula reforms need to consider that every child's development is individual, and this can create a significant impact on their learning. In England, children are expected to be 'school ready' at the age of five whether they are ready or not. Whereas, in Finland, children are aged seven when they start formal education. The argument being that these two additional years will increase the children's maturity mechanisms, and therefore create firmer ground for their schooling attainment.

So far, however, there has been little discussion about how six-year-old children may experience their education so that it will fulfil their experience of successful 'happy' school years and serve as a guide for lifelong learning. This study proposes that there are *two key reasons* that could 'hinder or hurry' a child's educational achievement. ***Firstly*****,** the child's chronological age and the connection to his subjective development when starting the educational journey should be considered. One of the key pieces of evidence in support of this view is Finland's successes in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2013; Sahlberg, 2011, 50; Burridge, 2010; OECD, 2007). This success raises questions on how children who start their formal education at the age of seven (and before that, mainly enjoying free play, creative arts and social opportunities), are still able to achieve one of the top performance indicators at age fifteen in literacy, numeracy and science (OECD, 2013).

It has been suggested by Dee and Sievertsen (2017, 781) that when children start school at an older age (relative maturity), they may have: "A variety of developmental advantages relative to their classroom peers." Absolute maturity reflects on the hypothesis that formal schooling is developmentally more appropriate for older children and: "Aligned with the demands and opportunities of formal schooling" (Dee and Sievertsen, 2017, 781, 783).

I consider whether the flexibility in school starting age, and including opportunities in high-quality play-based pedagogy, would target those essential development gaps. It is proposed that even small differences in academic achievement in early age: “Tend to intensify over the years rather than converge” (Janus and Offord, 2007, 1-2). Several studies have confirmed that: “Children who enter school lagging far behind do not usually catch up” (Duncan and Magnuson, 2005; Lamy, 2013, 32; Burchinal, 2018).

Burchinal (2018, 4) and Duncan and Magnuson (2005, 35) also noted that attention has generally focused on test scores rather than recognising the gap in children’s school readiness level. English curriculum discontinuity is evident when observing The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017, 5) framework where the emphasis is on identifying and targeting gaps in learning, in order to close them effectively. EYFS will be updated soon and the newer Education Inspection Framework (EIF) (Ofsted, 2018a, 3) now stresses the emphasis on the quality of education – Intent, implementation and impact. However, as soon as children leave the EYFS range, this is no longer the focus. In contrast, later school starting age and high-quality play-based pedagogy could proposedly level the possible development gaps between the children.

> “No other country has so little variation in outcomes between schools, and the gap within schools between the top and bottom-achieving students is modest as well. Finnish schools seem to serve all students well, regardless of family background or socio-economic status.” (Sahlberg, 2011, 5)

Therefore, it could be suggested that the later enrolment demands for academic schooling could lead to a narrowing in the skills gap between children.

Secondly, the research to date has tended to focus on six-year-old children’s academic achievement rather than their developmental skills. What is expected from a six-year-old academically is significantly different when evaluating English and Finnish curricula and learning targets. According to Montroy, et al. (2014, 300), an early formal curriculum can destroy a child’s confidence in learning and possibly trigger mental health issues. Therefore, children’s developmental

foundations and especially their self-regulation skills need to be well in place before moving on to a higher demand curriculum. Some children, without appropriate school readiness, could possibly disengage as they believe they cannot possibly achieve the targets (Montroy et al., 2014, 300). Therefore, I argue that a child's educational achievement should be supported with the age appropriate curriculum, without academic targets and tests. The author argues that policymakers, government officials, and educational advocates might benefit from following the examples set in countries with high student achievement as models for curriculum change, especially in young children's education. Young children's education should be in line with their stage of development.

There are indications that in addition to other significant factors (parenting, environment, nutrition etc.), children's early educational experiences have an important role in shaping their successful school years. Several studies have indicated that various early interventions have a positive impact on a child's school readiness when participating in an educational setting at an early age (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004, 713; St. Clair-Christman et al, 2011; Lamy, 2013, 33). These justifications could suggest that there is a significant link between a child's personal development, early school starting age, curricula and later success or possible failure in life. However, some of these governmental intervention programmes seem to be controversial when analysing the follow up research at a later stage. For example, Carlsson-Paige, et al. (2015, 1) claimed that there is no solid scientific evidence that shows that children who are taught to read in kindergarten have any long-term benefit from it.

In this study, therefore, I argue that most children would benefit from *post intervention* (my own term). By this I mean, governments could provide the high-quality early learning interventions instituted during early education, by continuing to promote play-based curricula, thus supporting, even at a later age, the child's natural growth and development. These post intervention programmes would therefore involve, in the same manner as earlier education, plenty of multi-faceted play, free exploration and outdoor sessions all linked seamlessly to age-related academic learning activities. These post interventions would continue into middle childhood (ages 6-9), thus allowing each child to develop naturally, rather than

attempting to hasten an individual's development at an inappropriate age for that child. These so-termed post interventions could be seen to utilise and promote the children's inner dispositions and consequently encourage them to take gradual and progressive control of their learning. In short, as they mature children could be expected to be equipped with the tools to learn and to understand how they learn. This would enable them to be responsive to further education.

One key motivation for this study is that the both countries belong to the United Nations (UN, 1989) and therefore, have recognised the importance of play. Universally, playing is considered so significant to childhood that it is documented in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989). Article 31 states: "The child's right to relax and play, including the wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities" (UN, 1989). Furthermore, a child should have an opportunity to participate in decision making and to be heard. Therefore, children's opinions and voices should be part of the core curriculum and when implementing the pedagogy.

Lastly, when aiming for the *continuity and stability* in the emergent curriculum for the six-year-old child it should still continue to offer play-based learning. Therefore, references and research to the EYFS (DfE, 2017) framework are applied in this study. This framework is similar to the Finnish pre-school curriculum. Play is emphasised in both of these curricula frameworks. For example: Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017, 9) context states that: "Each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned, purposeful play and through a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity". However, when children move to Key Stage 1 in England, play-based opportunities begin diminishing in the curriculum framework. I consider that learning through play should be the main priority with children aged six-years-old and younger. This view is also supported by several researchers (Sutton-Smith, 2001; Lester and Russell, 2010; Anning, 2014, 8; Vandervert, 2017, 202) whom, for example, consider children's play as crucial for developing their neuronal network, creating positive emotions and facilitating happiness in individuals which subsequently could lead to stronger learning experiences and well-being. Generally, children seven years and younger, enjoy play which is associated to a

child's normative developmental stages (Parten, 1933,136). Therefore, it is understood that play-based learning is considered more suitable with children of this age. After seven years children's normal cognitive development gradually moves towards the concrete operational stage as described by Piaget (1952), influencing similarly further developments of play stages. According to Piaget's theory, children seven and upwards are identified by their ability to start thinking logically and demonstrate their reasoning skills. Therefore, older (optimum) school starting age prevails and expected academic curriculum targets are more achievable. Therefore, play should be considered as a highly valued vehicle for children aged six and under for achieving their maximum school readiness. (Alexander et al., 2014, 1329). This topic will be explored further in my literature review: 'The role of play'. Thus, this study, also includes accounts of English and Finnish teachers' perceptions on play and whether they believe it is important to implement play-pedagogy on the six-year-old children's learning.

1.2 Objectives and Scope

The objectives of this research are to determine how English and Finnish teachers view their respective curriculum and whether they are of the opinion it offers the best attainments for six-year-old children. Both participant groups' responses are analysed and compared to reveal whether teachers felt the curricula support children's natural development and school readiness. England - where children start their school earlier and are occupied within academic curriculum - and Finland where the curriculum is mainly based on exploration and play. Furthermore, it is expected that the data will reveal some of the pedagogical impediments that teachers encounter when curricula are not determined by age related aims and objectives.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyse the following perspectives:

- ✓ Teachers' views, feelings and opinions on children's school readiness
- ✓ The participants' opinions about curricular influence on children and teachers
- ✓ Teachers' ability to identify age relate curriculum practises

Teachers are identified as the best source to explain how curricula and pedagogy are implemented in the classroom and whether teachers are of the opinion that all children are genuinely ready for school. This research seeks to answer these problems by employing short questionnaires - to understand the participants' background information - and semi-structured interviews.

Furthermore, this research will make an interesting and valuable cross-international study in the field of primary education research as very few studies appear to have been conducted to gather comparable curricula information on six-year-olds educational settings between these countries. In this research, I will provide insights from teachers' polarised perceptions towards six-year-olds' curricula and offer possible solutions to reform future curricula.

The overall research question for this study is as follows:

The Research Question: A Comparative Cross-National Study of Teachers' Pedagogical Thinking about Six-Year-Old Children's Education and Its Suitability for Children Aged Six in England and Finland.

1.3 Research Process and Thesis Structure

This thesis has been divided into six key chapters. It includes the analysis of the most important literature, relevant methodology, findings and the analyses of the current state of knowledge related to this research.

Chapter I – Introduction

The first chapter introduces the study, including the background and research environment. The objectives and scope for this research will be outlined thereby displaying the overall research process and thesis framework.

Chapter II – Literature Review

Chapter two establishes the first part of the literature review. I will start to explore whether children are being pushed into formal schooling at a young age. What are the impacts of this approach? Is this happening at the expense of their happiness? It has been stated that when children do experience happiness in their academic context, they are more likely to have higher levels of academic commitment, attainment and personal enjoyment. I will also discuss some contemporary definitions and descriptions of subjective perceptions of happiness. Thereafter, I will explore research related to young children's contentment in their settings. The term *school readiness is discussed in depth*. The school readiness concept has been widely debated, researched and used, particularly in educational settings. Regardless of the high interest, there is still little consensus about what school readiness ultimately is. I will consider different definitions, including social interpretations, children's developmental and chronological age domains and how these correspond to the chosen topic. I will further encompass teachers' views and beliefs on school readiness through research.

This chapter will also explore relevant literature in an attempt to define the term quality in early childhood studies. What are quality settings? Do they offer the best outcomes for children's learning? Longitudinal studies are investigated and

analysed as to whether these findings confirm the benefits of the high-quality settings. The literature review will further investigate how these early years programmes have been proven to foster children's school readiness, school success and lead to possibly affirmative developmental outcomes This section will analyse recent evidence on 'booster programmes' and clarify, whether there are strong benefits from the early start and whether the cognitive attainments remain positive. Thereafter, the literature review will explore the role of play in learning. Play is recognised as a universal activity of childhood. This section starts with the complex definition of play, its positioning, benefits and connections to learning. I will examine current negative positioning of play in schools and speculate as to why this phenomenon is viewed as 'just playing'. Increasingly younger children are being prepared for academic study and the term 'schoolification' has been adopted to describe the school-like exercises and values, as opposed to play practices. Therefore, this part will demonstrate the benefits of play for child development and its importance for learning. Educational commentators have called attention to children's declining play opportunities and its possible connections to poor mental health. Finally, play's role is recognised and its connection to a child's self-regulation and its importance for school readiness and attainment is reviewed.

Chapter III – Literature Review

Chapter three establishes the second part of the literature review. This chapter explores the governments' official rationales for England's and Finland's curricular policies and political reasons for regulating the school starting age. It is predicted that there will be several opposing views concerning the aims of curricula and what is expected from six-year-old children in these countries. Subsequently, this will lead to a consideration of views and definitions concerning curricula. Reasons for curricula policy change will be analysed. I will explore these increasingly academic approaches and whether early childhood curricula are changing into high stakes testing and datafication. The political climate and increased funding have forced the educational settings to prove their accountability which then consecutively affects the early years pedagogy. I will offer scenarios on how changes in curricula have affected teachers' pedagogy and practises. I will

analyse the research and perceptions on an ‘ideal’ curriculum; which is understood to support children’s own interests, experiences and discoveries. This chapter will continue by comparing and exploring how six-year-old children’s school achievement, assessments and testing are organised in England Year 2, and how assessments and testing in Finnish pre-primary school are conducted. Contrasting policy will be explored on how the new curricula are applied in these countries and how the reformed curricula are viewed to respond to children’s educational attainments. Further, I will contrast views on English and Finnish curricula on outdoors as a potential learning environment.

Finally, noticeable differences between English and Finnish education systems are highlighted in the table presented. The final chapter draws conclusions from the English and Finish school contexts in a comparative way. Overall, both of these systems are practicing diverse academic standards, policy and therefore culminating in different ways of learning and enhancing children’s development.

Chapter IV – Methodology

Chapter four discusses the chosen methodology, including research outline, objectives and aims. The conceptual framework and study design are scrutinised including the research outline, objectives and study aims. I will evaluate research ethics with teachers as participants, including procedures with the informed consent form and how I was able to access research data. This chapter will consider the benefits of the pilot study. Furthermore, the advantages and disadvantages of the chosen procedures of the data collection processes are considered. Both participant groups completed the short questionnaires and semi-structured interview questions. Finally, the study’s bias and reflexivity are contemplated and rationalised.

Chapter V – Findings and Discussion

Chapter five analyses the findings which were based on 17 English, Year 2 teachers, from 12 primary schools including the three English pilot-study teachers, and 20 Finnish teachers, from six different pre-schools. These findings aim

towards a novel contribution and to promote discussion around childhood curricula and policy practises. Firstly, teachers' background information via short questionnaires are analysed. The short questionnaires aimed to show the common trends between the participant groups and how they responded to the semi-structured interview data. Overall, nine questions were provided: four closed questions and five open questions. Secondly, the teachers' semi-structured interview findings are synthesised and contrasted to achieve an argument. The findings are presented in tables using frequency and percentage.

Chapter VI – Conclusions

Chapter six draws final conclusions and thoughts for further contemplation raised. I will discuss the study's theoretical and practical implications including its reliability and validity. Finally, I will assesses the recommendations and provide suggestions for further research.

1.4. Significance of the Study

The study of teachers' perceptions of school readiness and curricula for six-year-olds can be a pedagogical paradigm in the early childhood area. The aim of this research is to contribute to young children's curricula reforms, and further distinguish the current pedagogies and developmentally appropriate practices. It is hoped that the findings of this research potentially benefit and informs the educators, policymakers and governments to reflect current early childhood educational practices. Furthermore, the importance of this thesis is to promote children's access to extended childhood; including activities, such as, free play creative arts and social opportunities.

Chapter II - Theoretical Foundation – Readiness or Happiness?

> *"All them years but I was just given a class of children and all I remember is that the children were happy. The Year 1 teacher was happy…and parents were happy. And I was happy. Whilst at the moment...parents aren't happy. I'm…tired most of the time. And children, I don't think, I think, they'd just been squashed a little bit."* – English teacher, Irene –

In 2012 The Daily Telegraph published an article claiming, "British school children are amongst the most stressed, unhappy and sedentary in the developed world" (Paton, 2012, n/a). A powerful lobby of childcare experts (e.g. Goddard-Blythe, Greenfield, Katz and House) signed a petition proclaiming that: "Growing numbers of children are failing to develop properly at a young age because of the toxic pressures of modern life" (Palmer, 2009; Paton, 2012, n/a). One of the proposed reasons for this was that children were '…being pushed into formal schooling at an increasingly young age' (Paton, 2012, n/a). Traditionally in the common public view education and happiness have not been seen as integrally linked (Noddings, 2003, 1). Yet, a good education should aim to: "Contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness" (Noddings, 2003, 1). Fundamentally, "emotions can influence the learning in a positive or a negative way, especially in the motivation to learn" (Gonzalez and Blanco, 2017, 69).

Defining happiness itself is complex. Thoilliez (2011, 331) described happiness as: "A state of being and a project built upon both subjective perceptions and normative judgments of the self". All in all, there have been few studies regarding the actual happiness experienced by young children prior to the 2000s (Park and Peterson, 2006, 325). The exploration of young children's emotions has proven particularly challenging. In the United States, in the early 1980s, Harter (1982, 35) was one of the few researchers who explored children's happiness and recognised that children, as young as 3-years-old, clearly understood four main emotions: "Happy, sad and mad—and in certain cases a fourth, scared". Furthermore, children were able to: "Give rich and appropriate examples of events or experiences in which they have had these emotions" (Harter, 1982, 35).

More recently, there has been an exponential increase in the use of the term “happiness”, and an increasing number of articles published relating to it (Thoilliez, 2011, 324; McLellan and Steward, 2015; Stasulane, 2017; Pranoto and Hong, 2018, 1). For example, a Spanish study by Thoilliez (2011, 323) focused on what makes children feel happy and how the findings could subsequently be applied to education. Thoilliez (2011, 324) approached the topic examining: “Three public and two privately-subsidized Spanish primary schools involving students from first to sixth grades.” The study engaged children as informants to find out what they say, believe and imagine about what makes them feel happy (Thoilliez, 2011, 324, 326). Two different data collecting techniques were applied: questionnaires and interviews to cover five areas through which children experienced happiness (Thoilliez, 2011, 330-331). These methods were then adapted according to age group: “The sample consisted of 817 boys and girls from across grade levels in primary education” (Thoilliez, 2011, 330). Overall, the youngest children (6 to 7 years of age) were the happiest. A downward trend gradually decreased to nearly two points lower for the eldest students (Thoilliez, 2011, 334). The study concluded that children’s happiness lies in their human relationships: family and friends (Thoilliez, 2011, 346). In conjunction with the school environment, the study found, that: “The children who lack the experience of being valued by their teacher have lower than average levels of positive affect” (Thoilliez, 2011, 346). Overall findings indicated the importance of preserving, increasing and promoting the children’s happiness through teachers’ interactions (Thoilliez, 2011, 325). It should be noted, however, that the study also warned educators about…

> “…the risks of turning our pedagogical action in a “child-happiness-centered” pedagogy. Caring about children’s happiness is one thing but turning the looking for their happiness into the guiding concern of our educational intentionality, would remove education itself.” (Thoilliez, 2011, 348)

A serious weakness with this argument, however, is that, the study by Thoilliez mainly focused on analysing the older children’s narratives and leaving the younger children’s (6 to 7 years) responses obscure. Interestingly, the work reported that some of the children’s personal accounts were unhappy

experiences, and at the same time happy, indicating that their immediate feelings (happiness/ unhappiness) possibly overlapped (Thoilliez, 2011, 347). The question arises as to whether education should, at least, provide the necessary conditions for children to be happy in their school life, even if it does not provide direct happiness.

Arguably, the last phase of the study could have been explored further (Thoilliez, 2011). This consisted of pictures portraying a girl in four different situations: playing alone with toys, watching TV with her parents and siblings, being praised by the teacher, and playing with friends at the park. “The children were asked to look at the pictures and to try to imagine themselves in each situation, and then to say which one they would feel happiest in and why” (Thoilliez, 2011, 341). The most popular picture among the children was the one with the girl playing with her friends at the park. It would have proved interesting to analyse this information in more depth and explore how this information could be utilised to improve education, especially with the younger children. For example, several studies have stated that play is indeed the foremost most enjoyable activity for children (Pramling Samuelson and Carlsson, 2008, 623; Jarvis et al., 2009, 11), and, therefore, any curricula should connect children’s natural enjoyment of play and make the necessary links to pedagogy. When children chose the *play picture* in this study, this could possibly indicate their inner desire and happiness with the play situations. Therefore, offering play-based pedagogy could accomplish ‘child-happiness-centered’ learning.

Several contemporary research findings have suggested (Lewis et al., 2009, 397; King et al., 2015, 64; Heffner and Antaramian, 2016, 1695; Datu et al., 2017, 29) that when students and teaching personnel are experiencing happiness in their educational context, they are more likely to have higher levels of academic engagement, achievement and personal fulfilment.

> “Happiness and education are, properly, intimately connected. Happiness should be an aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness’.” (Noddings, 2003, 1)

These views are supported by Hinton (TooGood, 2015, n/a), who applied quantitative and qualitative measures to investigate the connections between happiness, motivation and academic achievement in students' learning experiences in the United States. Hinton's key findings were that Grade Point Average (GPA) is positively associated with happiness including student and teacher relationships, and school culture (TooGood, 2015, n/a). To achieve this Hinton (TooGood, 2015) mentioned strategy games and role play aimed at strengthening students' social and emotional skills. Referring to Hinton's research: TooGood (2015, n/a) recommended: "Hands-on experiences, paired and group activities" …therefore… "encouraging the students to collaborate, make group decisions, develop relationship skills, and resolve conflict peacefully." Hinton (2015, n/a) proposed that all this will help students develop: "a stronger sense of self-worth and self-efficacy to build the confidence that fuels academic success" (TooGood, 2015, n/a). When considering primary school children in American Nel Noddings (2003, 243), mentioned that: "Play can contribute directly to learning…and all teachers should be aware of the power of play in learning." It would appear that there is potentially a significant connection between 'happiness' and play-based learning.

An English study by Allen, et al. (2018, 28) utilised the "How I Feel About My School" (HIFAMS) questionnaire to measure young children's (4 to 12 years) happiness and subjective well-being in school. The questionnaire asked children seven questions on how they feel about different school-related situations. "The children respond to each item on a 3-point Likert scale: sad (0), OK (1) and happy (2)" (Allen et al., 2018, 27). Further questionnaires were allocated to parents and teachers to validate children's responses (Allen et al., 2018, 27). A noteworthy question here might be however, whether adults are required to *validate* children's perceptions or are we ready to hear children's voices as authors?

The research data was collected from three different samples totalling 2384 children (Allen et al., 2018, 28) and stated the following:

> "Most children reported high levels of happiness. The playground item had the greatest percentage of children reporting they were happy, and the work item had the smallest percentage of children responding that they were happy." (Allen et al., 2018, 31)

Interestingly: “Parents and teachers consistently rated the children as happier than children rated themselves” (Allen et al., 2018, 32). It was apparent from this study that children’s answers presented a strong argument as to how they really felt about their school and where they were the happiest whilst there, in this case: the school’s playground (Allen et al., 2018, 36).

In conclusion, happiness is experienced internally and thus its existence could be difficult to prove. However, happiness is related to children’s subjective well-being (SWB) (Mínguez, 2019, 1) and therefore, young children’s environments should provide happiness, whether it is family at home, friends, school or immediate surroundings (Vorcapić and Šikić, 2019, 15). If children experience happiness in their academic context, they are more likely to have higher levels of academic commitment, attainment and personal enjoyment (Seligman et al., 2009, 293). Instead of experiencing age-related activities and happiness, increasingly younger children are experiencing formal schooling which may possibly lead to them feeling pressured to achieve school readiness without experiencing a sufficiently age-related curriculum. Therefore, I will next analyse school readiness concepts and related research.

2.1 Defining Children’s School Readiness

> *“Ermmm…certain level of ermmm…readiness to learn, I think.”*
> – English teacher, Helen –

The term *school readiness* is a widely used notion particularly in educational settings (teachers), by policymakers and lay users (e.g. parents). A large number of researchers have debated over this concept, vast research data exists (Datar, 2006, 43). Despite the broad interest Lin, et al. (2003, 226) have argued that, ultimately: “There is little consensus about readiness.”

For almost a century, the field of early education has addressed questions related to how readiness is to be conceptualized (Scott-Little et al., 2006, 154). Snow (2006, 9) highlights the problem as: “The lack of agreement about the key components of school readiness and theoretical models”. According to Bingham and Whitebread (2012, 4), difficulties arise because there is: “No agreement upon a definition of the term…what should young children be prepared for?”

> “In essence, the disagreement about terminology and definition encapsulates a fundamental difference in conception of the purpose of early years education.” (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012, 4)

Therefore, Whitebread and Bingham (2011, 4) have argued: “Whether, how and why a child should be made ready for school”. Evidently, the term *school readiness* has been much debated for a long period. As early as 1901, Johann Pestalozzi (1907, 78-81, 85) was one of the very first authors who acknowledged the concept of the child’s maturation and readiness, and he compared this process to one’s nature i.e. developing without force. Pestalozzi (1907) examined the significance of a child’s “developed powers” and the idea of children learning through “the head, the hand, and the heart” (McKenna, 2010, 123). The term “readiness” appeared in print in the 1920’s in the United States and thereafter began to receive substantial interest (May and Campbell, 1981, 131; Scott-Little et al., 2006, 154).

In the early twentieth century the term “readiness” was practically understood as synonymous with “reading readiness” (May and Campbell, 1981, 131). Historically, conceptualisation of school readiness applications have been made on the child’s developmental domains as “readiness for learning” or “readiness for school, as a fixed or prerequisite set of physical, intellectual and/or social skills needed in order for children to be able to fulfil the requirements of the school environment” (Scott-Little, et al., 2006, 154). However, the child’s chronological age – the maturational view – is no guarantee that the child is ready for school (Scott-Little et al., 2006, 154) as every child is unique, including their individual development “which varies greatly from one child to another”. Some children will need more help than others. Therefore, attention should be paid to the transition

context as a whole, in addition to the child's individual readiness level including the school's readiness to cater to each child with their different family backgrounds. Therefore, when examining later existing concepts of "school readiness" the term incorporates its exceptionally complicated multifaceted dimensions (Scott-Little et al., 2006,154; Häidkind et al., 2011, 61).

Sahin, et al. (2013, 1708) defined school readiness as: "A multifaceted process which encompasses all the developmental areas and various skills of children rather than only focusing on cognitive and literacy skills". Similarly, Ahonen, et al. (1995, 170) emphasised that school readiness should be considered as a whole set of features, including: physical, motor, cognitive, socioemotional and social aspects. Linnilä (2011, 18; 2006, 36) considered what factors contribute to a child's readiness and divided school readiness (or school maturation) into three areas: physical, cognitive and socio-emotional competences.

Children's socio-emotional development is generally regarded as an important factor when determining school readiness. Originally, Bowlby (1988) regarded the secure attachment between mother and child as vitally important, greatly influencing the child's ability to control his social-emotional skills (Moullin, 2017, 17). According to Denham, et al. (2014, 247)

> "Social-emotional skills undergird young children's success or failure at adapting to sometimes challenging preschool and kindergarten environments, and making the most of their experiences there, to learn and grow in social and academic functioning." (Denham et al., 2014, 247)

The Department of Health described school readiness loosely as: "A measure of how prepared a child is to succeed in school cognitively, socially and emotionally" (Public Health England, 2015, 4). According to Janus and Offord (2007, 2), "School readiness can be broadly understood as an outcome of the early years." The US National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAYEC) states that, in an ideal situation all children should start school ready to learn, and consequently, be able to experience successful secondary years to come (NAEYC, 2009). Generally, *school readiness* can be defined as applying to

someone who is fully ready to learn and able to achieve academically (Brown and Pickard, 2014; Brown, 2013).

Helin (2000, 14) stated that when a child is school-ready he can take responsibility of goal-oriented learning, he is able to share the teacher's attention with many other children, and he is able to comply with issues that are not just fun. Similarly, Ladd, et al. (2006, 115-116) suggested that a child has achieved school readiness when he/she is able to adapt to the challenges of the educational setting. Therefore, self-regulating skills could be seen as a key contributor to success in the classroom setting (Schmitt et al., 2015, 28).

Meisels (1998, 3) explored the concept of school readiness in more depth and identified four definitions that could be subsumed under the term “school readiness”. The first concept is *the maturationist view*. This model connected to the child’s maturation which relates to the child’s capabilities to function at school, with little or no impact from the environment. Meisels (1998, 12) called this stance “the idealist/nativist” view. This view operated on the assumption that external elements cannot alter the child’s expected developmental stages: e.g. “Parental nurturance, the economic environment, educational inputs, or other social factors” (Meisels, 1998, 13). Kohlberg and Mayer (1972, 451) referred to this viewpoint also as “romantic” and describe it as: “What comes from within the child is the most important aspect of development.”

The second view is called the *empiricist/environmental* view wherein the child’s capabilities are described as a set of specific skills. An empiricist conception of this construct defines: ‘‘Readiness [as] something that lies outside the child’’ (Meisels, 1998, 52). The existing account states: “That readiness is a set of particular behaviours, skills, and personality traits that are basic precursors to school achievements and could be measured” (Meisels, 1998, 52). According to this view: “The children are either ready for school, or they are not. If not ready, the skills and knowledge they lack can be identified and then taught” (Dockett and Perry, 2002, 71).

The third perspective is portrayed as *the social constructivist* perspective where readiness is described as: “A function of the meanings and values assigned by an

individual school community" (Meisels, 1998, 21). The children's readiness is embedded in the child's social and cultural context, for example, expectations and norms. Also, according to this viewpoint, parents' socioeconomic status (SES) and the quality of the educational setting contribute to readiness. Dockett and Perry (2002, 71) propose that depending on the situation, readiness could mean different things, because...

> "...children could be 'ready' for one type of school experience, but not another. This view accepts variability in development without regarding it as a deficit." (Dockett and Perry, 2002, 71)

Meisels (1998, 3) stated that these three aspects may present certain challenges to young children's abilities and teachers' pedagogy, such as, educator underestimating children's existing skills and knowledge base.

Consequently, Meisels (1998, 4) presented a fourth interpretation of school readiness and titled it *the interactionist* view (Meisels, 1998, 3). This perspective aimed to solve the difficulties found in the previous views by recognising what children already know and the capacity of schools to adapt experiences for children who demonstrate different strengths and needs. ''An interactionist perspective frames readiness as a bidirectional concept that is constructed from the child's contributions to schooling and the school's contribution to the child'' (Meisels, 1998, 49). This fourth definition takes into account that, "the instructional tasks that emerge are grounded in a comprehensive assessment of the child's skills, knowledge, behaviours and accomplishments" (Meisels, 1998, 3). In conclusion, Meisels (1998, 7) recognised that, "individual child performance is multidimensional" and "readiness is not an end in itself; it is the beginning of an active teaching and learning engagement" (Meisels, 1998, 9).

Maxwell and Clifford (2004, 42) also proposed a broader use of the term school readiness. The term school readiness embodies a multitude of concepts including: "children, families, early environments, schools and communities" (Maxwell and Clifford, 2004, 42). According to Maxwell and Clifford (2004, 42)

> “Children are not initially ‘ready’ or ‘not’ ready for school. Children’s skills and levels of development are strongly influenced by their families with different backgrounds and through their interactions with other people and environments before coming to school.” (Maxwell and Clifford 2004, 42)

This paradigm is similar to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model that an individual’s development and learning is a consequence of wider social aspects and attention should be paid to the context as a whole. School readiness expectations from a child are therefore also culture-bound (Noblit, 2013, 239) and so shaped by historical, institutional and political forces on the perception of what skills, knowledge and abilities are important for children’s school success (Scott-Little et al., 2006, 155).

One way to describe school readiness is broadening it in social and cultural terms. In the United States, Graue (1992, 225) examined social interpretations related to school readiness and conducted an ethnographic study of kindergartens in three communities: the school, the family and the community, and how these engaged in the kindergarten experiences.

According to Graue (1992, 226), each setting formed their own *school readiness expectations.* These expectations were entwined with the social interpretations and beliefs on child development, parental partnership and the child’s level of maturity, including child’s relevant experience and skills and the school’s intervention to the remedial education. In her discussion, Graue (1992, 239), was unable to give any single definition of what school readiness is exactly. However, she referred to readiness as: “A matter of contextual demands rather than an absolute child characteristic” (Graue, 1992, 239). In her later studies, Graue (1998, 13) described readiness as: “A murky idea integrally tied to our ideas about how children develop and what we can do to support that process.”

According to Dockett and Perry (2002, 68) it is: “Clear that definitions of readiness vary, as do the ways of assessing readiness. Often, comments are made about children’s ages, gender, maturity and physical stature.”

As a final point, Pretti-Frontczak, et al. (2016, 49) concluded a wider definition for school readiness:

> "Readiness is a developmental process, largely unpredictable and highly influenced by the child's social relationships and interactions. Readiness requires a whole-child perspective where individual differences are expected, valued, and celebrated." (Pretti-Frontczak et al., 2016, 49)

In conclusion, it is evident that there are several concepts of school readiness and, that the term: "school readiness" is open to several interpretations. The term "school readiness" is widely used, especially by researchers and educators. Lacking an accurate definition for *school readiness* can trigger misunderstandings on how and when to use the term (Grimmer, 2018, 15). Therefore, the next section will evaluate teachers' perceptions on school readiness and how it is viewed in young children's learning. After all, teachers are the people who observe and assess the children's school readiness in their classrooms.

2.1.1 Teachers' Views and Beliefs on School Readiness

> *"No, sitä periaatteessa että, ei taidollisesti tarvitse olla miten...mitenkään lahjakas. Mutta että, pystyy omatoimisesti oleen siel koulussa ja isossa ryhmässä toimimaan, huolehtiin omista tavaroista ja asioista. Ja oleen valmis ottaan niinku vastaan ohjeita. Ja innostuu...niinkun oppimisesta. Että haluaa oppia uutta asiaa. Että se on periaatteessa semmosta kouluvalmiutta. Et ei niinkään se että, osaako lukee tai laskee..."*
> – Finnish teacher, Oona –

> *"Well, basically, you don't have to be academic...or talented. But being able to work autonomously whilst in school and in a big group, take care of your own belongings and things. And be ready to take instructions. And getting excited...about learning. So that you want to learn new things. That is basically school readiness. Not so much about the ability to read or count..."*

When exploring teachers' understandings on children's school readiness perceptions, one needs to bear in mind that these are shaped by several factors which are embedded in a sociocultural context:

> "…including their own experiences as learners and teachers, school structure, school teaching conditions, the expectations of schools for children, social forces, community needs and values, children's background, and external societal attitudes toward early childhood education." (Lin et al., 2003, 225)

Initially, the Early Year Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017) acknowledges that children grow and develop at different rates (DfE, 2017, 6), and it embraces: "Learning and development opportunities which are planned around the needs and interests of each individual child" (DfE, 2017, 5, 9). However, when children get older, it is expected that adults lead activities: "To help children prepare for more formal learning" (DfE, 2017, 9). When children are considered school ready, the preparation for that has occurred in pre-schools, nurseries, childminder settings quite often. But how many early years settings actually contact the feeder schools to ask what school readiness actually looks like to teachers in schools compared with the early years setting's perception of what children should be able to know and do when they start school. A specific aim by School of Education is to ensure children's school readiness…and "…to ensure they are ready for school" (DfE, 2017, 5). Therefore, confusions can arise for practitioners, particularly around when and how to introduce formality, and when to begin to move children on to the next stage.

One of the earliest school readiness surveys involved kindergarten teachers. The survey was requested by The American National Education Goals Panel and conducted by the National Centre for Education Statistics in 1993 (Heaviside and Farris, 1993, 1). The aim of this survey was to establish an agreement on the definition of school readiness (Heaviside and Farris, 1993, 1). This detailed survey sought to discover public school kindergarten teachers' views and beliefs related to school readiness, as well as the teachers' pedagogy and identification of the background characteristics of the teachers (Heaviside and Farris, 1993, 11). The survey involved over 1300 kindergarten teachers. 96% of the kindergarten

teachers held the view that: “The most important factor for kindergarten readiness is for the child to be physically healthy, rested and well nourished” (Heaviside and Farris, 1993, 5). The second school readiness quality was: “An ability to communicate needs, wants, and thoughts verbally (84%)” and the third was the child’s enjoyment of learning: “Including enthusiasm and curiosity in approaching new activities (76%)” (Heaviside and Farris,1993, 13). Interestingly the results revealed that: “Most public-school kindergarten teachers (88%) believed that readiness for school comes as children grow and mature and cannot, therefore, be pushed” (Heaviside and Farris,1993, 5). However, the majority of the teachers (94%) believed that they can enhance a child's readiness by offering educational experiences to build up those important readiness skills (Heaviside and Farris,1993, 16). The report concluded, that despite pressure for being school ready, the most important thing, according to teachers, is the child’s, “physical well-being, social development, and curiosity” rather “than knowledge of discrete skills” (Heaviside and Farris, 1993, 31). Concisely, it is important to note, when analysing the wider aims of the study, the confirmation that children need to be physically ready for learning, which meant that their basic needs, e.g. nourishment and sufficient sleep, were met (Heaviside and Farris, 1993).

When evaluating the kindergarten teachers’ views and beliefs regarding children’s school readiness, there are several similarities between Heaviside and Farris’s (1993) survey, and an American Early Childhood Longitudinal survey done a decade later (Lin et al., 2003). Interestingly, it appears that the views of all these kindergarten teachers seemed to continue the same over this time period (Lin et al., 2003, 225, 223). For example, an American study conducted by Lin, et al. (2003, 225) examined kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of children’s school readiness among teachers with diverse educational backgrounds and the school settings. The study revealed that kindergarten teachers’ overall view consisted of: “A strong emphasis on the social aspects of learning” and children’s ability, “to acquire appropriate forms of behaviour” (Lin et al., 2003, 225, 223). The study also indicated that younger teachers considered academic skills more important than older teachers and therefore expected higher academic competence from the children (Lin et al., 2003, 225). Some of the reasons for this might be teachers’ work experience or education. However, Lin, et al. (2003, 235)

concluded that there is a general national pressure for higher academic attainment: “Including a strong concern about teaching reading more effectively from kindergarten through third grade.” An implication of this is the possibility that external factors, e.g. public debate and policy makers’ attitudes, might have influenced new teachers’ conceptions about readiness in kindergarten (Lin et al., 2003, 235). Therefore, play-based learning may have a low priority, or it may be considered as a waste of time by government or school (Nicolopoulou, 2010, 2; Pistorova and Slutsky, 2018, 497).

The earlier study by Heaviside and Farris (1993, 25-26) concluded that the most experienced teachers (those who held a higher degree in education and more years’ experience in teaching) increased children’s opportunities for creative arts, play and crafts as opposed to the younger teachers’ favour for academic skills. In addition, both studies found similarities between the teachers’ readiness expectations. Survey by Heaviside and Farris (1993, 5) noted that the metropolitan status of the schools, race, and the socioeconomic status of the children influenced teachers’ views of readiness and their awareness of it. In the same way, Lin, et al. (2003, 225) noted that: “Teachers’ readiness expectations were influenced by their gender, age and the geographic region where they were teaching.”

A recent study by The Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY, 2013, 1) reported that 97% of childcare professionals in England and Wales understood that the term: school ready refers to children who have the following attributes:

> “• have strong social skills
>
> • can cope emotionally with being separated from their parents
>
> • are relatively independent in their own personal care
>
> • have a curiosity about the world and a desire to learn.” (PACEY, 2013, 1)

The research report (PACEY, 2013, 1) stated that in England how teachers interpret the term school ready is in stark contrast to how it is declared by policy

makers and regulators. In this report, teachers considered that children need to play more, because it benefits, for instance, the child's emotional and creative development (PACEY, 2013, 2).

A Turkish study by Akman, et al. (2017) interviewed preschool and first year teachers and explored whether the child's school readiness can have an impact on classroom management. Akman, et al. (2017, 36) concluded that the social emotional readiness of children is one of the most essential elements in classroom management. Furthermore, the teachers in both participant groups stated (preschool teachers, 72% and primary school teachers, 50%) that: "Children with low readiness levels had difficulty in learning" (Akman et al., 2017, 31). Teachers also expressed the opinion that children with the lower readiness level appeared to experience a lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence and had behavioural problems which reflected negatively to the other children as well as the teacher (Akman et al., 2017, 31). In contrast, the children with a higher level of readiness seemed to experience boredom and impatience because they had to wait for their classmates (Akman et al., 2017, 32). In contrast, high-readiness-levelled children were better learners, more popular among their peers, and were able to encourage their friends (Akman et al., 2017, 32). The researchers concluded that when considering the readiness criteria for starting school, the primary school teachers stated that the readiness of children should be considered along with their chronological age (Akman et al., 2017, 37).

Ring, et al. (2017, 1) evaluated different concepts of school readiness adopting a mixed-methods approach. The American study involved parents, teachers and children. One of the applied methods were semi-structured interviews which employed 32 pre-school and kindergarten teachers. The pre-school teachers' answers revealed that the main focus is on curriculum and the importance of the children's academic skills. Pre-school teachers considered, for example, number and letters recognition to be very important (Ring et al., 2017, 3). Kindergarten teachers emphasised children's ability to share, take turns and be part of social activities (Ring et al., 2017, 4). The research identified participants' views on school readiness predominantly as "maturationist-environmental" (Meisels, 1998), which was "associated with a child's age and the acquisition of academic skills"

(Ring et al., 2017, 1). Participants' school readiness conceptions revealed that the concept of child-centredness is undervalued and the participants lacked in considering the child as the starting point for learning and teaching (Ring et al., 2017, 4). Researchers considered this view as a risk for children because it:

> "Impacts on children's future development through negatively affecting dispositions such as self-confidence, risk-taking, initiative, curiosity, cooperativeness, engagement, persistence and enthusiasm, as children experience failure in completing tasks that they are not developmentally ready for." (Ring et al., 2017, 4)

In conclusion, the teachers' concepts of school readiness varied depending on the age of the children. It appears that kindergarten teachers expect strong social aspects of learning and communication from the young children and expect that the children are able to acquire appropriate forms of behaviour. Pre-school and primary teachers required more from the older children expecting them to master higher academic skills e.g. letters and numbers. Furthermore, children's curiosity about the world and their desire to learn was seen as part of school readiness. It was also proposed that the child-centredness is disappearing and schoolification-epidemic happening because of growing academic expectations (Bradbury, 2019, 11; Brogaard Clausen, 2015, 358).

The next section is set up to investigate how high-quality settings benefit children and strengthen their school readiness. In addition, I will explore if the existing research confirms the long-term benefits of early years education.

2.2 Quality in Early Childhood Education and Positive Outcomes

> "Quality is a concept typically used to describe features of program environments and children's experiences in these environments that are presumed to be beneficial to the children's well-being based on research and practice." (Love et al., 2002, 146)

Quality early educational experiences are considered important, yet, there is little consensus about identifying *quality,* because many variable factors play a part (e.g. families' socioeconomic background, poverty, practioners' qualifications) when defining what constitutes quality, especially in early childhood education. Quality is far more complex, and Lamb and Sternberg (1990, 373) considered that early years settings have "myriad incarnations" and therefore those variable factors and experiences in children's lives must always be viewed in total context.

Although difficulties remain, there have been several worthy efforts to capture the nature of quality outcomes in childcare and education. In the United States, the Department of Education was the first to introduce a study of the effects of a high-quality preschool program for children born in poverty (Schweinhart, 2003, 1). During 1962-1967, the U.S. Department of Education founded several early years research projects focusing on children from low-income families. Three initial longitudinal studies were conducted: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, Abecedarian Study and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers Study (Schweinhart, 2003, 1). In these programmes young children took part in high-quality early years programmes, defined as High/Scope's participatory learning approach (HighScope Educational Research Foundation, 2018). These projects aimed to discover if high-quality programmes offered for disadvantaged children supported long-lasting effects. The Perry Preschool Study was the piloting programme (1962-1967) which examined 123 African Americans who were at risk of failing in school (Berrueta-Clement et al., 1984,1). The 3 to 4-year-old children were randomly divided into two groups. The first group participated in the high-quality HighScope preschool programme and the second group received no specific preschool programme (Berrueta-Clement et al., 1984,1). The piloted programmes incorporated child-initiated activities and enhanced the children's sense of social responsibility and their interpersonal skills (Appendix 1). Forty years later, Schweinhart (2003, 43) reported that the socioeconomic success of study participants was greater, including less crime convictions and fewer teenage pregnancies (Lamy, 2013, 34). When followed-up these three studies Lamy (2013, 33) disclosed that all these programmes reported overall more: "Success in school and life than the control children…" who did not attend these programmes. The research findings could suggest that the key factors for the children's

achievements were that these settings offered them high-quality standard interventions (Appendix 1).

In England, a similar kind of study was funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 1997-2013. The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project was the first notable longitudinal study that was aimed at exploring the effectiveness of pre-school education and care on children's development for children aged 3 to 7 years old (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004, 713). The information was collected from…

> "…3,000 children who were recruited at age 3+ and studied longitudinally until the end of Key Stage 1. Data were collected on children's developmental profiles (at ages 3, 4/5, 6 and 7 years), background characteristics related to their parents, the child's home learning environment, and the pre-school settings children attended." (Sylva et al., 1997-2003, i)

The EPPE project found that high-quality settings play a pivotal role in children's social and cognitive development (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008, 24; Sylva et al., 2006, 87). These high-quality settings can improve children's school readiness skills and therefore increase their school success. Snow (2006, 8) claimed that these greater school entry skills are highly correlated with children's later academic experiences, for example, literacy skills. Therefore, Snow (2006, 8) claimed that the government: "Must enhance children's preparation for school in the early years."

Evidently the EPPE study provided strong evidence of enhancing the children's school readiness through high-quality, play-based education in early years settings (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004, 713). The researchers, Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004, 713) maintained that: "High-quality pre-school education can help to alleviate the effects of social disadvantage and can provide children with a better start to school." The children, all of whom were three years old and over, were first assessed after joining the study. The researchers created individual profiles on each child's intellectual and social/behavioural development. The children were then assessed using standardised instruments including reports from the early year's staff (Sylva et al., 1997-2003, i-ii). Additional assessments

were carried out when the children moved into further school years; including testing in reading and mathematics (Sylva et al., 1997-2003, 39). When analysing the children's progress, Sylva, et al. (1997-2003, 55) noted that on entry to school, the nursery setting had enhanced the children's development if they "attended any form of pre-school setting compared to none". Yet, when moving to Key Stage 1 the home children started catching up.

> "This suggests that the impact of pre-school operates through a stronger start to school and NOT through increased capacity to learn more in subsequent years." (Sylva et al., 1997-2003, 57)

The results of these longitudinal studies indicate strong benefits of an early start in *high-quality* settings over the years. Therefore, the evidence presented could suggest that it is possible to improve children's academic outcomes and their school readiness, especially if the setting is of a high standard (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004, 714; Sammons et al., 2004, 701-702; Sylva et al., 2011, 119; Lamy, 2013, 33; Faulkner and Coates, 2013, 251) (Appendix 1). The above statement is interesting, as clearly children enter school with higher cognitive attainments if they have been in a pre-school setting. Conversely, in children's later school years pre-schooling does not necessarily mean that the child is capable of learning more. Recent studies have discovered similar types of outcomes when expanding the research to academically specified subjects (Hill et al*.,* 2015, 77).

An American study by Love, et al. (2002, 146) focused on four different areas of quality, when investigating successful outcomes for children: what elements are provided in quality childcare and education, what is essential to achieve quality, what are the relationships between quality and children's development and well-being, and capital spending to improve children's development. Love, et al. (2002, 146) reviewed the common, quality features in 28 research publications, mostly American studies (173-188), and noticed that three aspects recurred in these studies: "A distinction between the *dynamic* (interactional) and *static* (structural) features of a classroom and staff characteristics" (Love et al., 2002, 146, 151). According to Love, et al. (2002, 148-149) several aspects outside the setting also

affected the components of quality: family's income, mother's education, child's temperament, family stress – just to mention a few. Similarly, The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development study (NICHD) (2006, 8-9), described the quality setting via process and structural outcomes. The structural quality can include aspects of the learning environment e.g. staff qualifications, safety factors, adult-to-child ratio and group sizes (NICHD, 2006, 8-9). *Process* quality assesses factors such as available learning opportunities, for instance free play or children's experiences with staff, including adults' imagination and children's peer interactions (Sylva et al., 2006, 78; Munn, 2010, 1; Mathers et al., 2014, 55). When evaluating the quality features for children's outcomes the evidence on process quality has been noted as a strong indicator, however the structural characteristics influenced these outcomes (Mathers et al., 2014, 61).

Overall, these types of studies have consistently demonstrated a connection between high-quality childcare programs and children's short and long-term positive developmental outcomes. The study by Love, et al. (2002, 154) concluded, not surprisingly, that the children are better off when enrolled in the high-quality settings.

A cross-country comparison study by Cryer, et al. (1999, 340) examined the relations between structural and process quality in different preschool programs. The aim was to detect whether the structural features differ or stay the same across the chosen four countries: Germany, Portugal, Spain and the United States (Cryer et al., 1999, 340). Surprisingly, this study reported that the structural features have an impact on process quality but there was no: "...consistently powerful predictor of process quality…and there was no single block of variables with an overwhelming influence" (1999, 339).

Overall, it is possible to compare and measure concept of the quality between settings and countries. Although research results seem to be affected by the chosen methods, and how they been applied. Raikes (2017, 515) acknowledged that, when applying tools, they need to protect children's rights and provide validity. Furthermore, each component needs to be defined and weighted against the other components as these will affect the results and the perception of the quality. Finnish researcher and policy adviser, Sahlberg states:

> "The basis of quality assurance relies on the proficiency of teachers and other personnel. Finnish educators and policymakers believe schools can change the course of children's lives, these schools must address the health, nutrition, well-being and happiness of all children in a systematic and equitable manner." (Sahlberg, 2012, 28)

When summarising these aspects, it is clear that in defining quality; policymakers, educators, government inspectors and researchers should focus on all aspects of a child's well-being. Furthermore, testing agencies should cohere to standardised research methods, including both dynamic and static factors. Therefore, it could be argued that further research is needed to find out what elements constitute the term *quality outcomes in early years education, and what the standardised tools of research should be,* otherwise the results are diverse and adverse.

Despite possible measurement obstacles and diverse outcomes, governments in England and the U.S.A. have invested in early years education and conducted some large-scale early years studies in recent decades (Schweinhart, 2003; Sylva et al., 2006). The next section will explore existing studies and present possible incoherent outcome evidence and long-term effects within these promoted programmes.

2.2.1 Quality Settings - Incoherent Outcomes and Long-Term Effects

> *"They're not ready but they got to, you know, carry on and carry on. But they're never…they've not got chance to catch up or…find, you know, reach what, where they could be, in their own time. Because they just got to keep moving."* – English teacher, Claire –

Several researches have indicated that high-quality educational opportunities can enhance young children's school readiness and therefore these conditions could be viewed as valuable (St. Clair-Christman et al., 2011; Lamy, 2013, 33: OECD, 2017, 16). Especially, the early school start has been noted as facilitating children

from disadvantaged backgrounds. Regardless of positive research results, current studies have likewise incoherent data when investigating *later* developments within these booster programmes. The noteworthy point here is that there is no definitive evidence or guarantee that children who attend academically orientated preschool programmes will succeed later (Broström, 2016, 4; Burchinal, 2018, 3; Bradbury, 2019, 9). Ansari (2018, 969) concluded that preschool programmes: "Should not be expected to be, a remedy for educational inequality throughout the life course."

Ring, et al., (2017, 1) warned that when teaching inappropriate skills early, it: "Compromises the concept of child-centeredness and presents a threat to educational opportunity, access and equity." For example, the common notion is that: "The earlier students learn the alphabetic principle, the more likely they are to perform well as they advance through school" (Harmon, 2017, 2). In England schoolification starts when the children start learning phonics aged four (Bradbury, 2019, 17). Wyse and Goswami (2008, 691) investigated *teaching of early reading* and concluded that there was: "No reliable empirical evidence that synthetic phonics offers the vast majority of beginners the best route to becoming skilled readers."

Stephen (2006, 1) revealed that international comparisons indicated that a later start appears *not* to disadvantage children. Conflicting evidence may suggest that there is no compelling educational reason for children to start formal schooling at a young age. Furthermore, developmentally unsuitable curricula demand might create more problems than solutions. Lamy (2013, 36) reminded us that education leaders: "Need to push back against the constant pressure to teach young children in the early grades with methods better suited for older children." Further research has been conducted recently and mixed evidence has been reported.

A recent American longitudinal study found mixed evidence of the long-term effectiveness of high-quality early years programmes (Hill et al., 2015, 77). This study (Hill et al., 2015) included two cohorts of children: a) the ones who participated in the public pre-kindergarten programme and b) the ones who did not. The aim was to determine if the children who participated in pre-kindergarten showed higher cognitive skills in 3rd grade maths and reading tests (Hill et al.,

2015, 67). There were no statistically significant effects found for reading (Hill et al., 2015, 67). Then again, for maths, the pre-kindergarten group scored almost 18 points higher. The higher maths scores were mainly driven by boys (Hill et al., 2015, 67). According to researchers, one explanation could be the differences in boys' social-emotional maturation (Hill et al., 2015, 76). The researchers conclude that: "Future research is needed to identify the relative effectiveness…relative benefits and cost…for sustaining children's gains from high-quality pre-kindergarten programs" (Hill et al., 2015, 77).

In the United States, Magnuson, et al. (2007b, 44), noticed that the children who attended pre-school entered school with higher academic skills than their counterparts who engaged with other types of childcare arrangements. These researchers aimed to discover whether children who do not have pre-advanced academic skills, such as reading, are able to catch up on the missing knowledge later. Magnuson, et al. (2007b, 33) findings suggested that the other children will catch up with their classmates but only if the classroom size is small and the children are able to receive "high levels of reading instruction". The United Kingdom has one of the biggest primary school classes, with an average of 28 children (OECD, 2019a, 4). Whereas in Finland, there are only 10 children per teaching staff member at the pre-primary level (OECD, 2019b, 3).

A study by Blatchford, et al. (2011, 715) compared the effect of class size on classroom engagement and teacher-pupil interaction. In a total of 27 primary schools' systematic observation was applied in order to record pupils' behaviour; the mean size of the classroom being 23. (Blatchford et al., 2011, 719). The findings showed that teachers dealt with more negative behaviour if the classroom size was larger (Blatchford et al., 2011, 725). Further findings suggested that: "In smaller classes pupils get more individual attention, while in larger classes they spend more time listening to the teacher talk to the whole class" (Blatchford et al., 2011, 727). In England the current classroom sizes continue to grow and this could raise questions about quality. Conversely, Wright, et al. (2019, 53, 57) discovered that small class size could also be problematic when implementing activities such as group work, student interaction and engagement.

An earlier, multimethod approach study by Blatchford, et al. (2002, 118-119) also noted that large classrooms showed more teacher-directed lessons, struggled with teacher-student contact and offered lower levels of instructional support interactions. Love, et al. (2002, 146) pointed out that these *dynamic* (interactional) elements are important when investigating successful quality educational outcomes for children (Love et al., 2002, 146). When teaching a large class some teachers felt that: “They could not provide the quality of education important for young children, and this upset them” (Blatchford et al., 2002, 127).

To sum up, the research above could suggest that later school entry appears not to necessarily disadvantage children’s learning. However, the curricula offered, and its age-related relevance has a possible effect upon learning. In addition, interactional and structural variables need to be considered in this context, such as, smaller class sizes.

Overall, the results of these studies indicate that it is important to consider high-quality learning environments. It does seem that if the learning environments offer age related high-quality learning opportunities for young children, it is possible to influence their long-term benefits without exposing the children (under the age of the six) to high academic curriculum, opposed to developmentally appropriate practice-based curriculum. It further appears that when following children’s age-related interests, they are able to retain their enthusiasm and therefore, hopefully, continue their later academic success. However, the early years are affected by a ‘trickledown effect’ with pedagogy moving in the direction of mastering academic skills. High-quality curricula need to be in accordance with the children’s age and offered with plenty of play opportunities (Miller and Almon, 2009, 42; Claessens et al., 2014, 404; Bassok et al., 2016, 1).

Overall, schools and learning environments should offer play-based pedagogy, including a high degree of child-initiated and child-led experiences, as with young children it is the most natural way of learning. Therefore, the next chapter attempts to describe play’s role in learning and its full continuum of meanings.

2.3 The Role of Play

> *"I'd just give them more time to explore and to play."*
> – English teacher, Claire –

There is no doubt that the twenty-first century is calling for people who can respond to the growing demand for skills and knowledge that cannot be outsourced or quantified; skills such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence, communication, collaboration and creativity (Pink, 2008, 2). Therefore, play could hold the answers for the future's uncertainties and risks. Indeed, play has evolved throughout history as the mechanism that enables human beings to cope with a rapidly changing world. Spinka, et al. (2001, 143) described play as, "training for the unexpected." Similarly, Elkind (2008a, 1) identified free play as vital to human health and creativity. No doubt, it has and has had an impact on individual development and species evolution in real life (Sutton-Smith, 2001, 230).

The significance of the role of play in research is evident when observing very young children. The majority of current contemporary research investigating child-centred play pedagogy has focused on the importance of play for children under school age, mainly ignoring children aged six and beyond. Therefore, little attention has been given to research exploring six-year-olds' play-based learning in the child's is in compulsory education. The next sections will explore the role of play in more depth.

2.3.1 Defining Play

> *"Ja sitten ne jo kyseli, että no milloin päästään leikkimään?"*
> – Finnish teacher, Carita –
>
> *"And then they already asked me, when we could play?"*

Play is an extremely varied and complex subject, and difficult to define. When attempting to describe the ambiguity of play, Wallerstedt and Pramling (2012, 5) stated that: "…it seems impossible to define play in a clear-cut manner if one wishes to encompass the dynamic and varying forms of human actions commonly understood by this term." Despite problems of identification, Wood (2015, xxii) defined children's play as: "The universal activity of childhood". Ashiabi (2007, 200) has defined play as freely chosen, explorative, actively engaging, opportunistic, pleasurable, creative and "concerned more with means than ends."

However, the deeper meaning of play and the notion of children's play is a problematic matter (Jarvis et al., 2009, 12-13; Sutton-Smith, 2001, 6-7). Adults especially may find play difficult to understand entirely (Wallerstedt and Pramling, 2012, 5) possibly because of: "Its apparently irrational connections between the real and the unreal" (Lester and Russell, 2010, 7). Play theorist Sutton-Smith (2001, n/a) referred to the concept of play as "…an ambiguous and multi-layered subject." Play lends itself to different forms from: "Highly active games such as chasing, rough-and-tumble and play fighting, pretend and socio-dramatic play, language play, social play and games with rules, construction play" and so on (Lester and Russell, 2010, 7; Sutton-Smith, 2001, 4-5). However, play may be employed in connection with a deeper function relative to human evolution, as described in the next paragraph.

Sutton-Smith (2001, 229) considered play as a model of evolutionary selection. According to Sutton-Smith (2001, 230) play creates variable adaptable choices for survival. This might be because play is characterised by the ambiguities and because it potentiates adaptive variability. Through play: "Children create new

learning experiences, and these self-created experiences enable them to acquire social, emotional, and intellectual skills they could not acquire in any other way" (Elkind, 2008b, 1). Therefore, play does not occur in a vacuum (Wood, 2013, 8). The broader society, history and cultural factors influence children's play and therefore play as a socio-cultural activity reflects these experienced contexts (Wood, 2013, 8-9). In other words, through present day play practises – self-direction, creativity, authenticity – children create their own way to comprehend the world and possibly the means to cope with contemporary society and thrive in the modern world.

In conclusion, play is multidimensional and difficult to define. Play is understood as an activity of childhood whereby children are able to choose their interests and then to explore and be creative. Play has also been proposed to be a deeper function related to human evolution as a model of evolutionary selection. Therefore, play could be considered as the mechanism that enables human beings to manage their imminent lives.

Next, I will explore play's relationship to learning, including further considerations as to why there is a decline in play opportunities. There are several strands of evidence which all point towards the benefits of play. Yet, it is currently questionable whether play is evident in six-year-old children's curriculum, since all governments do not recognise play and its fundamental role in learning.

2.3.2 Benefits of Play and its Relationship to Learning

> *"I think they do need to learn through play still."* – English teacher, Diana –
>
> *"Ja sit yksistään se, että ne saa niinkun leikkiä, niin se niinkun sitten taas motivoi sitä oppimista..."* – Finnish teacher, Katri –
>
> *"And then the mere fact that they get to play, so that then again motivates them to learn."*

In recent decades, there has been an increasing amount of research on learning through play, inquiry-based approaches, and why play is possibly the best way of facilitating children's natural development (Pistorova and Slutsky, 2018, 496; Nicolopoulou, 2010, 2-3; Brock, 2009, 20-22; Moyles, 2005, 3).

For children, play is arguably the primary and most enjoyable activity (Jarvis et al., 2009, 11; Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008, 623). Clearly, play promotes happiness in children's learning (Allen et al., 2018).

> "The act of playing is both evidence of, and supportive of, a smooth running of adaptive systems working in concert to generate positive emotions. The larger the sphere of influence of the positive emotions, the more likely that the child will be happy and have a strong sense of well-being." (Lester and Russell, 2010, 25)

Play gives children vital awareness of their existence, and freedom to choose what to execute including endless opportunities to dictate the different culminations of the act itself. "Children are not as concerned with the outcomes as they are with how they are playing" (Ashiabi, 2007, 200) and "Play in children's lives serve[s] no concrete purpose; it is predominantly an end in itself" (Alexander et al., 2014, 1337).

Children are curious and inventive. They want to discover and ask questions. But most of all children: "Have a natural inclination to play" (Moyles, 2005, 3). Sutton-Smith (2001, 231) referred to this as a *play gene* which is encoded into human biology. Whitebread, et al. (2012) suggested that:

> "Play in all its rich variety is one of the highest achievements of the human species, alongside language, culture and technology. Indeed, without play, none of these other achievements would be possible." (Whitebread et al., 2012, 3)

Alexander, et al. (2014, 1329) stated that play is a highly valued vehicle for learning. However, children themselves do not separate play and learning (Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008, 621). Or as Vygotsky (1966, 8) put it: "He plays without realising the motives of the play activity." "When the adult says

play is a developmental experience, for the child it may be nothing but hide-and-seek" (Sutton-Smith, 2001, 216). Observing children's play, Sutton-Smith (2001, 43) discovered that children developed their skills through play (such as football). These new skills then enabled them to go on playing with other children, therefore substantially increasing their shared experience of happiness (Lester and Russell, 2010, 18; Sutton-Smith, 2001, 43).

According to Anning (2014, 8) it has been hard to find empirical research evidence that focuses on how children learn through play in educational settings. It has been even harder to prove the value of learning through play prior to recent research into brain development (Anning, 2014, 8). Interestingly, as early as two decades ago, play theorist Sutton-Smith (2001) believed that children are born with the capacity to develop a huge neuronal network that will deteriorate if not used. Vandervert (2017, 202) has suggested that:

> "The brain's cerebellum and cerebral cortex are the origin of culture and... cerebellar models that came to constitute culture...derived specifically from play." (Vandervert, 2017, 202)

Pretend and/or socio-dramatic play is one of the five stages of play (Nijhof et al., 2018). Lillard (2017, 826) proclaimed that pretend play is culturally universal and is: "A signature behaviour of early childhood". Several studies point out the benefits of pretend play. Sociodramatic play occurs when voluntary social role taking involves two or more children. "Children pretend to be other people, that one object is another, and even that non-existent things exist – all apparently with full knowledge of what the real situation is" (Lillard, 2017, 826). Furthermore, Bergen (2002, 3) detailed that: "Pretend play requires the ability to transform objects and actions symbolically; it is furthered by interactive social dialogue and negotiation; and it involves role taking, script knowledge and improvisation." Lillard (2017, 826) claimed that: "The purpose of human pretend play is not known". However, pretend play can enrich children's language development significantly. For example, a Sri Lankan study by Rajapaksha (2016, 15) explored developing oral language skills through children's sociodramatic play/pretend play in the preschool classroom. The study observed 12 sociodramatic play sessions under

three themes: shop, market and dispensary (Rajapaksha, 2016, 17). Rajapaksha (2016, 22) concluded that sociodramatic play interventions created a language rich environment and nourished oral language development, especially with children who rarely communicate.

The above study (Rajapaksha, 2016) is supported by Vygotsky's (1934/1978). socio-constructivist learning theory. This theory builds on the idea that children can reach higher levels of knowledge through relations with their peers and with the help of an adult. Elkind (2008b, 4) indicated that: "Children's capacity for learning is limited by their social situation, their emotional condition, and their physical and intellectual development." In sociodramatic play children are often recognised as behaving beyond the expectations of their age group thus creating rich learning opportunities. Furthermore, Corsaro (1992, 161) stated that children's role play is affected by the adult world which children themselves collectively construct, develop, share and present it as their own predispositions to the impending futures.

Mahwish (2016, 280) investigated children's cognitive and social development through various research and found that: "Children in the early years need to spend time in free play rather than in structured and scheduled school environments". I have previously proposed the argument that if young children's curricula are focused on narrow academic domains, then this is possibly neglecting children's holistic learning experiences. Nicolopoulou (2010, 2) noted that: "Young children learn differently from older children or adults". According to Kolb (2015, 103), "Each individual will engage with learning differently depending on motivation, past experiences, preferences for processing inputs, time, place and circumstances." This, in turn, supports the premise of this thesis that academic curricula demand may not be beneficial to children's short or long-term developmental and educational outcomes.

Despite varying views concerning the role of play in any given curriculum, Moyles (2005, 3) has argued, that we should not have to defend or justify play in learning. Research has shown the vast benefits of various types of play supporting children's developmental domains. For example, problem solving and critical thinking (Andrews, 2015,11), children's imagery use in their active play (Guerrero

and Munroe-Chandler, 2018, 354), language development and vocabulary acquisition (McLeod et al., 2017, 157), sociodramatic play and rough-and-tumble play supporting children's emotional expressiveness, emotion knowledge and emotion regulation (Lindsey and Colwell, 2013, 353) and pretend play strengthening emotional self-regulation (Slot et al., 2017, 12), pretend and sociodramatic play supporting language skills, imaginative and emotional needs, representational thinking and symbolic actions (Rajapaksha, 2016, 22; Broadhead, 2004, 9), active play tackling health and childhood obesity (Alexander et al., 2014, 1330; Lester and Russell, 2010, x). It could be concluded that various play types offer numerous learning and development opportunities and therefore, instead of teacher-directed instruction and aiming towards academic skills the focus should be on child centred learning via play. Learning through play develops all aspects of a child's development domains, especially in affective and cognitive areas. Children's play: "Is an intensely absorbing activity that serves as a powerful matrix for learning and development" (Nicolopoulou, 2010, 2). Although the status of play is clearly recognised in early childhood this recognition declines when children get older and start school.

The notion: 'Just playing' dominates the current position of play in education. In many English schools' play is limited because the teachers' practises are restricted by curriculum objectives and goal-orientated targets (Whitebread, 2013; Elkind, 2008a, 1; Moyles, 2005, 3). Interestingly, a report by PACEY (2013, 1) stated that 58% of teachers and 40% of childcare professionals felt there should be "greater emphasis on play in England." Thought the importance of play is thus recognised there are nonetheless indications that government proposals in England may create a "schoolification-epidemic" wherein younger children are prepared for academic skills rather than enjoying being children (OECD, 2017, 16; PACEY, 2013, 1). Obviously, this prophecy has fulfilled itself with the higher academic targets set by National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a). Conversely, the Finnish National Pre-primary curriculum has highlighted the fact that: "Children have the right to learn through play and experience the joy related to learning" (FNBE, 2016, 20).

In order to address these problems, Todd (2016, 622) has suggested that educational policies should: “Respond to the human element in education”... because it is “...an existential experience that is not something to be controlled but which is open to surprise and uncertainty.” The key to education is that learning should be meaningful and: “Enable students to orient themselves toward a changing and unpredictable world” (Todd, 2016, 624). Collectively pedagogy should be pupil-orientated, supportive and offer hands-on learning opportunities, enabling the students to be better equipped for their future.

Therefore, including play-based activities in the curriculum – at least, in relation to six-year-olds – might be developmentally beneficial. Research has suggested that especially outdoor experiences of play situations may have benefits for dealing with stress and negative experiences (Martin et al., 2018, 245). However, higher curricula demand and student achievement might be affecting the quality of play opportunities. Decline in play and increases in children’s mental health issues might be related as described, as described in the next section.

2.3.3 Decline in Play Opportunities and Mental Health

> *“Armm…if they struggle to follow it [curriculum], then that's when we get problems and they do need more of the…play based learning and things like that.”* – English teacher, Nicole –

As stated earlier, Sutton-Smith (2001) understood education to improve peoples’ lives, and therefore progress and enhance their future existence. However, as he pointed out, the paradox is that on the way to achieve this future, the children’s play opportunities may deteriorate (Sutton-Smith, 2001).

> “The prevailing ethos was that the education of children would assure their future. Such projection of Enlightenment philosophy and a sense that our progress lies in the hands of well-educated children is the source for the paradigm that children are the future. Of course, certainty about children's role in the future can come as a major burden for them and leads to all sorts of justifications for the sacrifice of their playing pleasure for society's long-term benefit. The child-of-the-future paradigm can lead to quite profound interventions in children's everyday lives, not all of which may be salubrious for them.” (Sutton-Smith, 2001, n/a)

Alexander et al. (2014) indicated the obvious connection between children's preferred play options and emotional well-being, and therefore, play: "Quite simply makes children happier." (Sutton-Smith, 2001, 32). It is clear that quality play opportunities enhance – at all ages – children's capacity for the important psychological adaption, which is linked to the development of children's social emotional development, physical and intellectual self-regulation (Dee and Sievertsen, 2017, 798; Elkind, 2008a, 15).

> "Yet play has currently fallen into some disrepute. School administrators and teachers – frequently backed by goal-oriented politicians and parents – broadcast the not-so-subtle message that these days play seems superfluous, that at bottom play is for slackers, that if kids must play, they should at least learn something while they are doing it." (Elkind, 2008b, 1)

Unfortunately, recent accounts suggest that the amount of quality free time and the opportunities to engage in social activities and especially outdoor play has declined greatly over the past half century, particularly, in the 'developed' nations (Whitebread, 2017, 167; Bassok et al., 2016, 1; Alexander et al., 2014, 1329; Gray, 2011, 443; Nicolopoulou, 2010, 1). Spontaneous play has also diminished because of other factors e.g. technological tools, fear of children's physical safety, parents and educators' understandings of play and lack of play spaces (Singer et al., 2009, 284-285; Elkind, 2008b, 15; Gill, 2007, 10). Furthermore, "substantial legislation...and its subsequent long-term impact on schools," have threatened children's play opportunities (Broadhead, 2004, 7). As a result: "Play has changed dramatically" (Singer et al., 2009, 289) and it is not available for children as readily as one might assume (Elkind, 2008b, 15).

The decline of play opportunities and increasing academic demands have been associated with children's mental health (Gray, 2011, 443). There were already worries concerning children's stress levels in the end of 1990's. American study by Hart, et al. (1998, 176) explored: "The effect of classroom type…on the stress behaviors of 102 pre-school-age children as moderated by socioeconomic status (SES) and sex." The concept of stress was defined as: "Any unusual demand for

adaptation that forces individuals to utilize their energy reserves that exceed what is required for dealing with ordinary events" (Hart et al., 1998, 180). The study recognised that children's *resiliency* to stressors may vary and mentioned also *moderate academic stress* which has positive effects for individuals. The selected five preschools provided ten classrooms in total. The researchers (Hart et al., 1998, 178) assessed the topic by using teachers' questionnaires and followed it up by comparing their responses against independent classroom observations. These classroom selection procedures were validated by: "…comparing the frequency of child participation in the types of activities available in DAP (developmentally appropriate classroom) and DIP (less developmentally appropriate) classrooms as moderated by sex and socioeconomic status of the children" (Hart et al., 1998, 179). "The fourth aim was to assess the proportion of stress behaviours that were exhibited in each activity type for DAP and DIP classrooms as moderated by sex and socioeconomic status" (Hart et al., 1998, 179). In conclusion, the preschoolers had twice the stress in DIP-classrooms (less developmentally appropriate) than in developmentally appropriate classes (DAP). Especially the lower SEN-background children had significantly more stress than children with a higher socio-economic background (Hart et al., 1998, 183). Boys had more stress than girls in fine-motor paper pen activities as well as more inappropriate classroom activities (Hart et al., 1998, 192). Therefore, it could be suggested that developmentally unsuitable curriculum could affect vulnerable children in a negative way (Hart et al., 1998, 192). This study clearly shows how children cope, or do not cope, with the pressure of the curricula.

Gray (2011, 443) studied children's opportunities for free outdoor play, from circa 1955 until to date, and noticed that a decline in play was in direct comparison to children's mental health problems in the United States. Gray (2011, 444) argued that: "…without play, young people fail to acquire the social and emotional skills necessary for healthy psychological development." This view was supported by Whitebread (2017, 167) who noted that there is a: "…growing crisis in children's mental health…aged 5-16" …in England. "The decline of children's outdoor play is often blamed on the seductive qualities of television, and more recently, computer games and Internet activities" (Gray, 2011, 446).

Children's mental health issues are also very much at the forefront of the educational and political debate in England (Brown and Carr, 2019, 242; Tooley, 2019, n/a). Improvements in preventing mental health problems was the focus of the political narrative of former prime minister Theresa May. May stated that new teacher training should include lessons on how to identify children who might have mental health problems and how to identify the early warning signs of potential problems, such as self-harm (Coughlan, 2019; Gov.UK, 2019a).

A recent Danish study by Dee and Sievertsen (2017, 782) investigated: "The causal effect of higher school starting age on different dimensions of mental health among 7 and 11-year-old children". The study used several methods to evaluate the topic. Firstly, the strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) screening tool was applied, containing 25 items based on evaluations of a mother, on her child's manners, e.g. cannot stay still for long or the child is overactive (Dee and Sievertsen, 2017, 783). The second data was sourced from the Danish National Birth Cohort (DNBC) and provided: "Detailed measures of children's mental health at ages 7 and 11 years" (Dee and Sievertsen, 2017, 783). When matched with the data from the children's date of birth and school starting age Dee and Sievertsen (2017, 782) discovered: "That a 1-year delay in kindergarten entry dramatically reduces inattention/hyperactivity at age 7 (effect size = –0.73), a measure of self-regulation with strong negative links to student achievement". Furthermore, there was a correlation between hyperactivity/inattention and a possible reduction in student performance in future (Dee and Sievertsen, 2017, 784). The recent DNBC-data also highlighted that the effects of delayed school starting age did persist at least up until late childhood. These findings indicate the importance of the child's chronological age, maturity and school readiness to mental health.

It could debatable how to enhance children's school readiness and look after their mental health. However, the key findings, throughout the several studies discussed here, seem to indicate that in order to achieve better educational outcomes for children, they should experience age-related pedagogy and curricula.

The curricula should also include opportunities to practise self-regulation skills as these have been recognised as key abilities with regard to further learning and academic engaging (Hudson and Jacques, 2014, 27; Durlak et al., 2011, 405). Therefore, the primary topic of the next section will be children's self-regulation and its relation to learning.

2.3.4 Self-Regulation and Play

> *"Et sitten ne muut asiat tulee kun se asia [itsesäätelytaidot] on kunnossa."* – Finnish teacher, Ursula –
>
> *"Those other things will come when that thing [self-regulation] is in order."*

The social learning theory proposed by Bandura (1976, 217) originated the idea of self-regulation as controlling one's behaviour. Whitebread (2012, 138) relates self-regulation…

> "…to fundamental aspects of emotional, social, cognitive and motivational development and is not at all the same thing as being ready to do what you are told or being ready and willing to sit still and be quiet." (Whitebread, 2012, 38)

For young children "carpet time" can be problematic as the children are expected to sit down quietly for teacher's input during the key core subjects, and this may lead to rebellious behaviour or "a passive and receptive role" (Katz, 2010, n/a).

Séguin and MacDonald (2018, 1148) defined self-regulation as the: "Child's ability to remain flexible and respond to various situations and control emotions in order to engage effectively with the environment." It is evident that children's early establishment with self-regulation has been seen to aid their later social and emotional benefits (Mischel et al., 2011, 253).

Zimmerman (2001, 5) stated that when students want to become masters of their own learning, their motivation needs to come from themselves. Blair (2002, 121)

analysed neurological data of school readiness and concluded that the best preschool programs focused on, “social and emotional competence” rather than limited academic context. Furthermore, Blair (2002, 111) stated that the focus in early years should be on working with others and developing self-regulation skills.

Mischel and Ebbesen (1970, 336) noticed that children’s capabilities to self-regulate their immediate actions varied. If a child is expected to be able to self-control his innate regulation skills these needs to be learnt externally and internally. Mischel, et al. (2011, 252) referred to this as “willpower” when examining key findings from the late 1960s and early 1970s longitudinal, classic; “marshmallow test”. “The critical component of the delay task was to resolve the conflict between taking one treat now versus waiting for two treats later.” (Mischel et al., 2011, 254). Over 500, four-year-old participants, completed the delay-of-gratification task. If the pre-schooler was able to master his/her self-control it continued to predict later outcomes in adulthood. The follow-up studies concluded:

> “Higher educational achievement, higher sense of self-worth, better ability to cope with stress and less cocaine/crack use particularly in individuals vulnerable to psychosocial maladjustment.” (Mischel et al., 2011, 253)

The researchers concluded that these: “Underlying mechanisms” of self-regulation could possibly be taught to young children and therefore “…to achieve sustained and consequential behaviour” (Mischel et al., 2011, 255). These cognitive strategies subsequently shape the child’s self-regulation and improve their control of immediate temptations (Mischel et al., 2011, 255). This self-regulatory ability could then possibly lead to better social, cognitive and emotional coping in adolescence.

A recent Scottish study by Arnott (2018, 951) explored data from two projects that investigated children’s social and creative play through exploratory qualitative observations, interviews and child-centred play-based methodologies. Arnott (2018, 951) wanted to find out how 3 to 5 years old children negotiate their tactics and applied socio-emotional self-regulation through their child-led play sessions. A total of 90 children were involved, across the two preschool settings. Arnott

(2018, 956) “identified that children…recognized, conceptualized and applied four elements of the Pedagogic Culture as part of their negotiation tactics and socio-emotional self-regulation...”:

> “… (1) the child-centred nature of children’s play and their autonomy in the play experiences; (2) the rules and regulations which governed the child-centred play; (3) hierarchies inherent in the context and (4) the power structures (both adult–child and child–child) in play.” (Arnott, 2018, 956)

Arnott (2018, 957) observed these four different elements of negotiating and socio-emotional self-regulation whilst children were involved in their play activities. Conducting different methods Arnott (2018, 956-957) was able to demonstrate children’s diverse abilities when applying their socio-emotional self-regulation. For example, children developed their awareness of other children’s emotions and “opportunities for demonstrating leadership in socio-emotional regulation.” For children to master these, different elements of negotiation tactics required a multitude of social skills and competences e.g. self-awareness and self-confidence. Some children were even capable of knowingly to “…provoke particular responses from practitioners and…use this technique to manoeuvre their play experience” (Arnott, 2018, 961). In conclusion, these findings were framed around child-centred play where children negotiated their tactics and applied socio-emotional self-regulation to influence other children. Similarly, Slot, et al. (2017, 12) observed the power of pretend play strengthening emotional self-regulation skills in children (and subsequently affecting their school achievements).

Consequently, young children need to learn social and emotional skills to self-regulate their emotions, and therefore, play could be seen the best way to promote this. If a child’s self-regulation is not well enough developed, it can possibly lead to problems later with their academic learning, including unwanted negative behaviour (Ladd et al., 2006), e.g. inattention and hyperactivity.

Occasionally delaying the child’s school entry might be the right option, and therefore safeguard a child from academic demands and personal struggle (Dee and Sievertsen, 2017, 798). However, it is important to note that rather than just

delaying school it might be more important to involve children with extended periods of various play opportunities before formal schooling. Consequently, play could be seen as a highly valued vehicle for promoting self-regulation skills. The following will explore different policy and research outcomes as to whether there is an ideal school starting age.

Chapter III - Political Reasons for Regulating School Starting Age

> *"I can't see that any of these children wouldn't learnt to read any slower if they'd done it at an older age."* – English teacher, Nicole –

In recent years, there has been increasing debate on school readiness and what age children should start their formal academic education (Dhuey et al., 2019, 538; Grissom, 2004, 1; Stipek and Byler, 2001, 175). Pupil intake / enrolment is determined by an age-graded structure, with the children's ages varying country by country. The key point being whether the child is school ready developmentally, since children are generally expected to be ready at a specified age.

In England children start school at five, nonetheless most children begin Reception class in September of that year before actually reaching the age of 5, sometimes even as early as 4 years 1 month, and this practice has become increasingly more common and formalised. In Finland children generally start school at the age of seven. Table 1 reveals that in most European countries children begin school at six years of age or older. However, the table 1 does not take into account what might possibly occur before statutory schooling.

Child's Age	**Country**
Four	Northern Ireland
Five	England, Malta, Netherlands, Scotland, Wales
Six	Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey
Seven	Bulgaria, Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden

Table 1: *Statutory School Starting Ages in Europe (Sharp, 2002, 1)*

Moss (2013, 2) has explored the relationship between early childhood education (ECE) and compulsory education, noting that these two have important connections and should be considered collectively.

According to Moss (2013, 3) early childhood education (ECE) should be recognised "as an important educational player" preceding statutory schooling. ECE could be understood as "an intervention that can improve the performance of children...in particular those at high risk of under achievement" (Moss, 2013, 7). Over the last few decades, increasing numbers of young children have progressed from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to a formal educational setting rather than proceeding to formal education directly from home (European Commission, 2020). The reason behind this is that quality early childhood education and care settings are recognised as providing educational services and laying ...

> "...the foundations for later success in life in terms of education, well-being, employability, and social integration, and is especially important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. High-quality early childhood education and care is therefore an efficient and effective investment in education and training." (European Commission, 2020, n/a)

According to Moss (2013, 4) the afore-mentioned relationships between ECE and the other educational institutes could be better acknowledged: "In terms of one part preparing and delivering students 'ready' for the next part". Presently, whether or not teaching is formal from the start of statutory school depends entirely upon the country and its curricular policy.

Evidence for the benefits of an early start originates from 21st century early childhood research. Interestingly, most studies in the field have failed to answer the question of what the right school entry age is. A significantly older American study by Shepard and Smith (1986, 79) noted that even with delayed school entry: "There was virtually no difference in achievement between the oldest and youngest age group." The study noted that: "The disadvantage of achievement…may more likely be a *combination* of youngness and low ability" (Shepard and Smith, 1986, 79). The concept of the *right* school starting age has been explored by a number of researchers. The past thirty years have seen

developments in the field that support the view that an early start: "...enables children to get a head start in their learning" (Sharp, 2002, 1).

More recently, research has emerged to determine whether school starting age has short- and medium-term advantages for children. For example, Dhuey, et al. (2019, 573) sourced and matched administrative data from the state of Florida, USA, to examine the effects of school starting age on children's cognitive development. Researchers utilised: "Fuzzy regression discontinuity design and large-scale population-level birth and school data" (Dhuey et al., 2019, 538). The findings in this study revealed that, where the school districts were redshirting (i.e. delaying) and early-grade retention was higher, the children had smaller relative age gaps in test scores (Dhuey et al., 2019, 573). The researchers concluded that when applying redshirting and retaining for children it accomplished: "Equally effective results because children coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds end up at roughly the same educational levels at the time of testing, irrespective of the affluence" (Dhuey et al., 2019, 574). The study is interesting because it demonstrates that children achieve about the same cognitive development – despite socioeconomic background – when their school admission is delayed. Therefore, it could be assumed that specific children at a young age, would benefit from a later start.

Sharp (2002, 1) concluded with similar findings and argued that an early start provides: "An opportunity for children from deprived backgrounds to make up the deficit in their academic skills". The Sharp studied however was limited to measurable data and empirical research.

An American study by Aliprantis (2014, 482) analysed data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–99 (ECLS-K). Data included: "A sample of over 22,000 5-year-old children enrolled in over 1,200 schools" (Aliprantis, 2014, 490). The strength of this analysis comes from the large measurable set of individual level variables (e.g. school entrance age and relative age between the youngest and oldest children, gender, children's books at home, specific benefits allowances, SES, mother's educational level and if the parents were present in the home or at work) (Aliprantis, 2014, 493). The weakness of the ECLS-K-data was that it demonstrated only short-term effects

(Aliprantis, 2014, 482). Aliprantis, (2014) considered several elements and variables with a goal towards discovering the causal effects that are crucial for deciding the age at which children should start school. One of the findings concluded that: “Children with few books at home performed much worse when entering at an older entrance age” (Aliprantis, 2014, 529). Another finding verified that: “Increasing entrance age has very large and beneficial effects on boys but relatively small impact on girls… by the spring of third grade, relative age effects are negative and large for boys” (Aliprantis, 2014, 520). Aliprantis (2014, 523) noted: “That changing the entrance cut-off date does not change all children’s experiences in the same way.” Therefore, this statement could actually support an argument for extra support and involvement in pre-school and not starting school earlier.

Despite extensive research carried out regarding school starting age, it seems that further research exploring later effects on children who started their school at, for example, the age of seven, might yield interesting results.

In England children start their school at five and in Finland when they are seven. Table 1 shows that in most European countries children start their school at six-years-old or older. Table 2, below, shows the PISA 2016 ranking list and how this relates to school starting age. Interestingly, this highlights the notion that starting school early does not necessarily provide the highest learning outcomes later (OECD, 2016a). Similarly, a recent study by Aliprantis (2014, 528) concluded: “That if children would start their education older it would increase their attainment in the spring of third grade.”

A recent study by Mahwish (2016, 280) stated that: “Starting school earlier than seven years of age is not beneficial socially or academically in the long run.” This Pakistan research indicated that the later start will also help children in their future academic success (Mahwish, 2016, 280). Contrary to this, an American study by Deming and Dynarski (2008, 72-73) offered an opposing view and concluded that there is: “Substantial evidence that entering school later reduces educational attainment (by increasing high school dropout rates) and depresses lifetime earnings (by delaying entry into the labour market).”

Education ranking of western nations
PISA, 2016
(school starting ages in brackets)

LITERACY	MATHS	SCIENCE
1. Canada (6)	1. Switzerland (7)	1. Estonia (7)
2. Finland (7)	2. Estonia (7)	2. Finland (7)
3. Ireland (6)	3. Canada (6)	3. Canada (6)

Table 2: *Educational Ranking of Western Nations (OECD, 2016a)*

According to Sherrod (2002, 2) regardless of research or governmental policies child's developmental aspects should be the main factor driving changes in the curricula. Clearly children's maturity increases naturally when they get older. English Minister of State, Nick Gibb (Burns, 2015) put forth the proposal that school starting age should be changed to *ensure* that summer-born children can begin school later. In England, the School Admissions Code (DfE, 2014b, 25) allows: "The parents…[to] choose not to send…a summer born child to school until the September following their fifth birthday." There was a recent follow up report by Cirin and Lubwama (2018, 7) who wanted to find out how the School Admissions Code, referring to a child's delayed admission to Reception class, has developed. Consequently, Cirin and Lubwama (2018, 5) conducted two online surveys in February 2017. The first part was addressed to 152 local authorities, and the second part to the parents of children (196 responses) born between 1 April and 31 August, who had requested a delay in their child's admission to reception (Cirin and Lubwama, 2018, 9). The final report findings showed that applications received by local authorities between 2015-2017 increased by 84% (Cirin and Lubwama, 2018, 12). How the local authorities handled each delayed admission case depended on the geographic area. According to the report (Cirin and Lubwama, 2018, 21-22), the main reason for parents delaying child's entry to

reception was their own views about whether their child was ready for school (97%) and evidence about summer-born children in school (77%). Interestingly, Cirin and Lubwama (2018, 7) found that there has been reluctance among: "Admission authorities in agreeing to parents' requests" because some schools assumed, they would miss out on their funding. The report concluded that especially wealthier parents are becoming more aware of their rights regarding school admissions. Similarly, in America, the highest quintile of socioeconomic status, white, highly-educated parents, have discovered that delaying, "redshirting", their children's entry to school gives their children developmental advantages (Dhuey et al., 2019, 571; Dee and Sievertsen, 2017, 781; Bassok and Reardon, 2013, 289, 295; Deming and Dynarski, 2008, 73).

One of the limitations with the report was that it did not explain what the *parent's evidence* related to summer-born children was (Cirin and Lubwama, 2018). The report mentioned the Phonics Screening Check, whether the evidence was this, or something else, was not clear (Cirin and Lubwama, 2018, 23). Nevertheless (Cirin and Lubwama, 2018, 12), the report revealed that most local authorities (63%) are still asking parents to make a case if they want to delay a child's entry to reception. It would be interesting to ascertain why local authorities do not trust parents' judgements of their own young children.

Delaying school entry may help close the educational gap between children if starting their education at a later age. Evidently, a vigorous curriculum that does not support children's natural development and learning could also pose an obstacle for achieving the best results possible, especially in later life. According to the OECD (2010a, 5), the gap between the top and bottom-achieving students in Finnish schools is moderate. Whereas in England the overall attainment gap has displayed relatively little change.

> "The disadvantage gap continues to narrow during the primary phase but has now stopped closing in the early years and by the end of secondary school, at Key Stage 4. Indeed, between 2017 and 2018, these gaps have widened slightly." (Hutchinson et al., 2019, 10)

The recent government in England stated that: “Schools must continue to strive to close attainment gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers” (DfE, 2014e, 5). Therefore, teachers and schools might feel the pressure as the stakes are high:

> “The Ofsted inspection framework asks inspectors to make judgements about the performance of all groups of pupils. The efforts that schools are making to close gaps are scrutinised and they are held to account for their effective use of the pupil premium (PP) grant.” (DfE, 2014e, 5)

According to The English National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a) a child is expected to have the necessary skills at the required age. However, if these learning outcomes are not in line with the child’s developmental requirements, as in the case of late summer born children, it could possibly cause more damage than appropriate growth (Elliot Major and Higgins, 2016, 47; Gorard, 2015, 28; Whitebread and Bingham, 2013, 28-29).

Views on whether children should start their school at an early age or later, clearly divides researchers, parents and educators. The issue remains controversial because research evidence to date can be interpreted as supporting both arguments (Datar and Gottfried, 2015, 333). Nevertheless, any curriculum should work on the basis that the child is part of the learning process, and the curriculum should be focused on supporting children’s “in-born intellectual dispositions, for example, to make the best sense they can of their own experience and their own environment” (Katz, 2010, n/a). Furthermore, Sahlberg (2011, 1) from Finland has stated that…

> “…To be successful with these challenges is both a *moral and economic* imperative for our societies and their learners…Moral obligation because each person’s well-being and ultimately happiness arises from knowledge and skills…that good education produces...Economic because the wealth of nations depends as never before on know-how.” (Sahlberg, 2011, 1)

In this quotation, Sahlberg (2011) is commenting upon the societal challenges of curricula and its impact on students. Therefore, the next part will analyse views on young children’s curricula and its deeper interpretations.

3.1 Views on Curricula

"Well it [curriculum] does [support] to…it does to a certain extent. Because you've been hmm…told what to teach...Hmmm…but the expectations have risen dramatically, and they are unrealistic in, in my personal opinion."
– English teacher, Lea –

"In a fast-changing world knowledge is merely an ephemeral commodity" and therefore, "learning and curriculum should be explored through human experiences, active engagement, through senses, language and other ways of knowing and understanding and linked to existing culture" (Alexander, 2010, 258).

The term curriculum, in this study, refers to the teachers' pedagogics and academic content taught in a pre-school or primary school. Both – English and Finnish – curricula are expected to provide the best goals and subject matters for future generations. In addition, the children are expected to achieve successful educational experiences, during their school years.

The term curriculum could be defined as…

> "…the knowledge and skills students are expected to learn, which includes the learning standards or learning objectives they are expected to meet." (Great Schools Partnership, 2014, n/a)

Curriculum policy requires teachers to apply and follow the objectives, targets and instructions. The English National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a, 5-6) outlines the curriculum aims as following…

> "The school curriculum comprises all learning and other experiences that each school plans for its pupils. The National Curriculum forms one part of the school curriculum…The National Curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens." (DfE, 2014a, 5-6)

The Finnish National Board of Education states that the pre-primary curriculum is

> "…an entity of instructions and education in which the goals of different elements are joined together to form the foundation for the operational culture." (FNBE, 2016, 27-28)

The Finnish pre-primary curriculum covers regulations on the objectives of pre-primary education and descriptions that support interpretations of these (FNBE, 2016, 28). Both curricula will be explored in more depth in a later chapter.

Clearly the conceptual framework of any curriculum is designed and intended to structure pedagogy, including evaluation criteria, and thus offer the best educational options to the pupils. Interestingly, neither of the described curriculum contains *strict, specific* instructions on how to *plan* the pedagogy according to the topics. Instead, both curricula encourage teachers to apply their own judgement and professionalism when planning.

Using the evidence review so far, I have argued that the ideal curriculum should recognise children's existing social and emotional, physical and cognitive development, and encourage children's in-born intellectual dispositions. According to Alexander (2010, 213) the overcrowded curriculum limits time for creative subjects. And therefore, I reason that six-year-olds curricula should include developmentally appropriate pedagogical practises for best results without the pressures of formal academics. This view is supported by the recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review, one of which states that effective teaching and learning should: "Equip learners for life in its broadest sense" (Alexander, 2010, 302, 491). Therefore, the next section will explore curricular policy change.

3.1.1 Changes in Curricular Policy

> *"And if you seem to be having…doing anything that's not necessarily in the curriculum, then…there can be a lot of…backlash for that."*
> – English teacher, Melissa –

According to Russell (2011) the change from the traditional kindergarten – learning through exploration and play – started to take shape post 1950s. In 1960's Italy, Malaguzzi was aware that education is, first of all, a political practice

and he argued that an education had an important part to play in interconnecting the present and the future (Moss, 2016, xvi). Russell (2011, 239) has argued that before the early years policy, the media advanced academic messages and contributed to a potential western cultural shift in expectations for kindergarten education.

> "Changes of kindergarten instruction over time reveals that three sources of public discourse – newspapers, state policy talk, and organized professional activities – progressively recast the purpose of a kindergarten education from a vehicle for young children's development to the foundation for the individual child's future academic achievement." (Russell, 2011, 256)

This has gradually led to the increasingly academic approach – instead of the child-centred approach – and to, "teach[ing] discrete, carefully sequenced skills typically through teacher-directed instruction" (Russell, 2011, 261). Since several policy changes have been implemented, there are now clear signs that the curricula are changing…into "high-stakes testing and datafication…" (Winter, 2017, 55). According to Reclaiming Schools (2016)

> "It was clear that its [new curriculum] requirements were completely out of step with the age of the child, and indeed more demanding of young children than the most successful education systems on the planet, in terms of PISA rankings." (Reclaiming Schools, 2016)

Examining these gradual curricula policy changes, it is important to question why academic demands are placed specifically on young children's education. Globally, governments have justified curriculum policies using explanations linked to global economics and new technologies (OECD, 2016b, 12). For example, in economics, governmental aims for curricula and political reasons are focusing on how human capital accumulation responds to early childhood environment (Campbell-Barr and Nygård, 2014, 348). Research into human capital theory (Schultz, 1972, 36; Arteaga et al., 2014, 234) argues that one explanation could be the rationale behind early childhood policy: It has been identified as an important period for human capital investment (Miller and Smith, 2011, 193;

Arteaga et al., 2014, 222) and as a consequence, recognised to reduce inequalities in education and society, especially in children from disadvantaged families (Miller and Smith, 2011, 197; Lubotsky and Kaestner, 2016, 194). Conventionally, human capital measures the level of education in comparison with the required skills and knowledge of the available workforce.

> "Complementarities in the production of human capital, and early investment in children's skill development will have large returns because they raise the return to future investments (Aizer and Cunha, 2012, 2; Cunha and Heckman, 2007, 33).

It is increasingly essential to recognise the fact, that what human capital predicts affects any nation's economic growth and success (Reardon, 2013, 14; Eurydice, 2009, 17; Schultz, 1972, 3). Therefore, particularly early childhood policy developments and programmes in education, along with their implementations to curricula, could be seen as crucial to the success of the future generation. In England, the former education secretary Michel Gove (DfE, 2010, 7) stated that these changes were necessary to keep pace with the most successful education systems in the world.

Evidently, the governments' aspiration is to create solid foundations for children's future learning (DfE, 2013a; FNBE, 2016), and consequently reduce inequalities in education and society (Rao, 2010, 139). Therefore, governments and their political aspects are especially involved in shaping the regulatory curricula frameworks. In spite of this shift in education, several researchers have pointed out that there are also many factors (e.g. poverty, genetics, neighbourhood, fair access to higher education because of overall funding and fees), preventing education from fulfilling its role as "the great equalizer" (Reardon, 2013, 13; Suggate, 2012, 182; Lee and Burkam, 2002, 1; Connell, 1993, 17). Generally, this puts a growing consensus and tension on governments to create highly educated societies with equal opportunities for all children and young people no matter what their background or family circumstances (DfE, 2013b). Sahlberg (2011, 1) has argued that transforming the schools' curricula is challenging: what to teach and how to offer it so that it will cater for learners from various socioeconomic backgrounds. The next part will focus on the entangled impact of curriculum and indications of "schoolification" in young children's education.

3.1.2 Consequences of Curricular Demands and Indications of "Schoolification"

> *"The new curriculum has put some real pressures on us."*
> – English teacher, Penny –

Froebel (1923/2013) protested against the educational system in which children were forced into a mould instead of being valued and nurtured as individuals. Similarly, Malaguzzi focused on the idea that subjects, e.g. mathematics, can be presented for 3- to 6-years-olds, but it should be offered in a broader, more general context, stating that: "Logical thinking is constructed and refined as much through the study of science, spoken and written language, drawing, art, music etc. as through the study of mathematics." (Cagliari, et al., 2016, 104)

> "This line of thinking anticipated an inter-disciplinary discourse that emerged with complexity theories in the mid-1970s; it suggests a root for his theory of 'the hundred languages', which over time became an emblem of Reggio Emilia pedagogy, a theory in which children (human beings) are recognised as possessing many cultural possibilities, which can too readily be systematically denied and taken away by the culture of school and society." (Cagliari, et al., 2016, 104)

Recently, Russell (2011, 236) has argued that: "…kindergarten now marks the beginning of formal academic instruction." Furthermore, several studies have showed that requirements to teach discrete academic skills to children might overshadow the importance of engaging them with the developmentally appropriate learning experiences which are better suited to encourage children's genuine engagement (Pretti-Frontczak, 2016, 51). It is understood that any taught curricula are to influence on children's longer-term outcomes (Bassok et al., 2016, 1).

Below is a dated, but still relevant example of children's transition in England from Reception to Year 1. It is evident that the pace of their learning can dramatically change (Table 3) (Sharp et al., 2006, 23).

Foundation stage		Key stage 1
Play-based	→	Work-based
Active	→	Static
Led by adults or children	→	Directed by adults
Thematic	→	Subject based
Emphasises a range of skills	→	Emphasises listening and writing

Table 3: *Changes Involved in the Move from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1 in England (Sharp et al., 2006, 23)*

When children reach Key Stage 1, the mode of the learning changes from play-based to work-based (Sharp et al., 2006, 131). Notably, the Table 3 illustrates the lack of play experienced by children transitioning from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1. Arguably, this shift from play-based to more formal work-based learning could surprise, undermine and intimidate children.

Comprehensive research by Fisher (2009, 131) examined the feelings and views of parents, teachers and children on moving from Foundation Stage to a formal classroom pedagogy. The views from these groups and their experiences of transition varied evidently because of their stance (Fisher, 2009, 144). For example, teachers were concerned about current practices whereas the children (55%) expressed fears about what was to come (Fisher, 2009, 141). A total of 2381 five-year-old children, from 134 schools, were asked to draw a picture about how they felt when moving to Year 1 (Fisher, 137). Fisher (2009, 140) discovered that 76% of children felt positively about the transition to Year 1. On the other hand, the study also revealed that 24% of children found it more difficult to adjust because of the reduction, particularly, in play and other freely chosen activities (Fisher, 2009, 142). Furthermore, the children disliked having to sit down and listen to the teacher (so called carpet time). The researcher concluded that the children coped better if the curriculum and pedagogy change took place gradually over time (Fisher, 2009, 141). The study does not confirm or deny that the children who recorded positively about their transition – because the children arguably do not know there is any other way – could not have felt even better with

a gradual phasing of curriculum changes over time. It is not just about being black or white, it is the grey areas in between, that could enhance children's experiences even further.

The educational changes, from the child-centred approach to the academic approach, have been also recognised by International Play Association (IPA, 2013). The IPA (promotes the child's right to play) released the summary of the United Nations General Comment No. 17, Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UNICEF) (2013). The review summary concluded their concern regarding: "The poor recognition given by governments to these rights" (IPA, 2013). According to Comment No. 17: "Most children are still controlled by structured and planned activities possibly denying their right to free play, creative arts and social opportunities" (IPA, 2013).

> "Teaching academic tasks to children at earlier ages will *not* result in greater learning for the vast majority of children, due to the developmental trajectory of child development and individual differences among children." (Guddemi et al., 2014, 1)

Arguably, it seems that children's cognitive performance is glorified over other developmental skills on the entry to full-time education. The anxieties about 'schoolification' and debates about what might be academically appropriate for children is not a recent phenomenon. For example, American educational professionals, The National Commission on Excellence in Education, in 1983 were already worried about young children's school experiences (Meisels, 1998, 6). In this case, the main concerns were detected when the American government decided to raise standards and to make the school curricula more rigorous (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Sharp (2002, 1) indicated that similar movements were noticed in England's previous curriculum policy change. Already, two decades earlier it was warned that:

> "Higher curriculum demands will likely to result in escalated demands in early years. Furthermore, if young children are less prepared to engage in academic work, these policy developments could present real difficulties for children who begin school relatively young." (Grissom, 2004, 2)

Clearly, devoted researchers have notified governments and policy makers of the negative consequences of the high demanding curricula decades ago (Pyle and Danniels, 2017, 274; Ring et al., 2017; Ashiabi, 2007, 205). Irrespectively of their concerns, further research has been implemented over the years to recognise the matter and possibly resolve divided opinions. For example, Ofsted's Annual Report 2010/11 drew evidence from 12 nursery schools, from outstanding to good, to demonstrated that high-quality phonic work needs to be the key skill to learn (Ofsted, 2011, 28). The report claimed that if a child starts early enough the high-quality phonic work, this would ensure child's literacy skills for life (Ofsted, 2011, 42). According to Gilbert (2010, 3), "Rigorous, intensive and systematic phonics teaching underpins reading, spelling and writing." The 2010/11 report explained that a more consistent and accountable curriculum is necessary if the standards in reading and writing are to improve (Gilbert, 2010, 3). Clearly this Ofsted report has influenced the new National Curriculum which was introduced in 2014 in England by the Department for Education (DfE, 2014a). The latest curriculum guidance emphasises teaching synthetic phonics in Reception and Key Stage 1 (DfE, 2013c). Furthermore, in 2012 all children in Year 1 (aged 5 to 6) had to take their Phonics Screening Check as a statutory assessment in England (DfE, 2013c). The test is either pass or fail. The latest report by Ofsted (2017, 2) proposed that the formal curriculum in the Reception Year will aim to prepare these four- and five-year-old children: "For the rest of their education and beyond." However, the age differences and the developmental gaps between the youngest and oldest children are not calculated within the test results and this can create problems when required to take any test.

Interestingly, Clark (2014) identified that there was a high failure rate in the Phonics Screening Check at the end of Year 1. Clark (2014, n/a) questioned whether it is right that children have "experienced failure at this early age." Clark (2016, n/a) claimed that: "The 'phonics check' is one of the most insane tests ever invented" because it monitors: "Whether teachers are teaching reading in the government-approved way." Furthermore, investigations have confirmed that:

> “The pass rate worsens gradually by month of birth, from the oldest to the youngest. Overall, the data suggests that a third of the children who fail would have passed if they had been born in September.” (Clark, 2016, n/a)

Therefore, it could be concluded that August born children double the chance of failing their phonics test (Clark, 2016, n/a).

Unmistakably, there is increased pressure also for teachers and schools to prove the students’ successful outcomes on assessments. Reclaiming Schools (2016, n/a), argued that...

> “Michael Gove’s new curriculum for KS1 and 2 appeared to be”... “impossibly demanding. It was clear that its requirements were completely out of step with the age of the child, and indeed more demanding of young children than the most successful education systems on the planet, in terms of PISA rankings.” Reclaiming Schools (2016, n/a)

Contrary to these high demands, ex- Standards Minister Nick Gibb claimed that English children are becoming fluent readers (Reclaiming Schools, 2018b, n/a) However, according to Reclaiming Schools (2018b, n/a), the rates in the Phonics Screening Check “show no such thing.” Such a claims are possible to check...

> “...against PIRLS, the international reading test taken by a representative sample of 10-year-olds (i.e. around 4 years after they had taken the phonics test). PIRLS is, unlike the phonics test, an assessment of real reading – reading for understanding” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Reclaiming Schools, 2018c, n/a).

Furthermore, Margaret Clark (2018) has exposed the distortion of teaching and claimed that: “The Phonics Screening Check is a waste of pupils’ time” (Reclaiming Schools, 2018a, n/a).

It is significant that 25% of August-born children are failing their phonics test. Failure in reading for understanding happens for children who are: “Afflicted by poverty and are often slower to develop” (Reclaiming Schools, 2018b, n/a). Therefore, immense pressure and children’s experiences for failings could be linked to later success or failure and have: “A long-term effect on their personalities, development, mental health and attitude to education” (Reclaiming Schools, 2018b, n/a).

Evidently, sooner or later this will possibly impact upon: “The teachers’ child centred pedagogical values” (Roberts-Holmes, 2015, 303), which will be discussed later.

Brooks and Murray (2018, 154) indicated that when an educational plan is: “...forced on a child, that agenda is anti-democratic.” The current (political) climate and increased funding has led to higher demands and accountability on educational settings, therefore, affecting early years pedagogy (Sharp, 2002, 1). Many schools are facing increasing pressure to prove achievement through standardised tests in order to show that children are really succeeding (Nichols, 2017, 17; Miller and Almon, 2009, 42; Sharp, 2002, 1; Stipek and Byler, 2001, 175). Teachers are responsible for analysing children’s attainment earlier, labelling children and possibly even attempting to predict their later academic success (Yoon, 2015, 367; Basford and Bath, 2014, 126; Brown, 2013, 554). According to Roberts-Holmes (2015, 302-303) this has forced teachers to test children’s skills and knowledge on the basis of accountability. Furthermore, it is the practitioners’ responsibility to ensure that the government’s pre-determined educational targets are achieved (DfE, 2017). For example, children - younger than 6-years - are expected to achieve the following early learning targets in mathematics:

> “…count reliably with numbers from 1 to 20, place them in order and say which number is one more or one less than a given number. Using quantities and objects, they add and subtract two single-digit numbers and count on or back to find the answer. They solve problems, including doubling, halving and sharing.” (DfE, 2017, 12)

These curriculum targets will require child’s ability to master concrete operations. For some children, who have not yet reached this cognitive development stage, these targets might be unachievable and will be reflected negatively to the national test results table.

As pointed out earlier, difficulties start to arise if curriculum is focused profoundly on academic content. A substantial body of research has confirmed that increasingly younger children are moved towards the higher curricula demands and serious academic work (Brown, 2017; Nichols, 2017, 17; Bassok et al., 2016, 1; Samuels, 2015; Russell, 2011, 237; Miller and Almon, 2009, 11; Tyre et al.,

2006), possibly: “At the expense of traditional early childhood activities” (Nicolopoulou, 2010, 1; Bodrova, 2008, 357-358).

Bassok, et al. (2016, 1) questioned the claims that: “Kindergarten today is characterized by a heightened focus on academic skills and a reduction in opportunities for play.” In order to prove these transforms in practise, Bassok, et al. (2016, 1) systematically documented changes across public-school kindergartens, comparing two large nationally representative datasets between 1998 and 2010. Bassok, et al. (2016) investigated several different dimensions, for example:

> “…kindergarten teachers’ beliefs about school readiness, time spent on academic and non-academic content, classroom organization, pedagogical approach, and use of standardized assessments.” (Bassok et al., 2016, 1)

Not surprisingly, Bassok, et al. (2016, 18) concluded that in recent years: “Kindergarten teachers…devoted more time to advanced literacy and maths content, teacher-directed instruction and assessment, and substantially less time to art, music, science and child-selected activities.”

Roberts-Holmes (2015, 302-303) reached similar conclusions earlier, and proposed that teachers are forced to produce appropriate test data which, in turn, have an effect on the teacher’s child-centred pedagogical values in favour of test-driven cognitive skills and knowledge. Therefore, teachers and practitioners can feel torn between the formal curriculum and child-initiated practices (Fisher, 2009, 138). For example, an English study by Brooks and Murray (2018, 143) focused on practitioners’ beliefs on school readiness and listening to young children’s voices. The statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework requires practitioners to listen to children’s voices (Brooks and Murray, 2018, 143; DfE, 2017, 5). Brooks and Murray (2018, 154) discovered the practitioners’ confusion between the government’s schoolification targets and the children’s voices in the EYFS (DfE, 2017).

Basford and Bath (2014, 119) confirmed that early childhood policies can often give contradictory messages to practitioners. Similarly, Nutbrown (2012, 2)

recognised these difficulties in the early years sector. One way to overcome these problems is teacher education. Nutbrown (2012, 64, 69) highlighted the importance of a highly skilled, valued and respected workforce. Knowledgeable practitioners: “Have greater power to perform the technical duties and therefore to satisfy the gatekeepers…whilst also satisfying their own moral and ethical duties…in [children’s] learning which is representative of their social, cultural and historical heritage” (Basford and Bath, 2014, 128-129). However, when moving on to the primary school sector recent survey revealed that 43% of teachers are considering leaving the profession (Lightfoot, 2016, n/a). The most mentioned reasons were: unmanageable workload, demands to achieve the targets, students’ negative behaviour and a lack of work-life balance. It appears that curriculum is not working for teacher, neither children.

The US National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009, 4-5) pointed out that if children’s education happens in:

> “…the high-pressured classroom the children are less likely to develop a love of learning and a sense of their own competence and ability to make choices, and they miss much of the joy and expansive learning of childhood.” (NAEYC, 2009, 4-5)

Prepping increasingly younger children in the direction of formal schooling might be problematic in many ways. According to Piaget’s (1952) child cognitive development theory, children younger than six, might struggle with abstract objects, logic and thoughtful information. Piaget (1952) carried out several observational studies of children’s cognitive development. Studies suggested that the child’s cognitive skills develop primarily through biological maturation and his engagement within the environment (Piaget, 1952). After a series of experiments Piaget (1952) proposed four; age-related stages of cognitive development. One of them being Concrete Operational Stage (7-11 years) which begins around the child’s seventh birthday. The Concrete Operation Stage indicates the start of child’s logical thinking (Piaget, 1952). This means that the child is capable of thinking internally rather than having to manipulate props, e.g. plastic Cuisenaire Rods for visualisation of mathematical operations. Interestingly, this stage and age marks the time children start their first year at school in Finland (Basic Education Act 628/1998). During the Concrete Operational Stage, the child is in

the beginning of his logico-mathematical thought (Copeland, 1979) and his thinking starts to develop similarly to adults. More recent arguments, such as, Margaret Donaldson (1978, 156) has challenged Paget's claim on these cognitive development stages. Evidence by Donaldson (1978) suggests that if the language used is age appropriate children can engage at an earlier age.

Contrary to Piaget's idea of the child's natural maturation, was Vygotsky's (1934/2012, 1934/1978) social development theory and the importance of supportive adult-child interactions.

> "Vygotsky's perspective on development is often referred to as a socio-cultural view because of his emphasis on the child's culture and the social environment as forces which shape development." (Keenan and Evans, 2002, 132)

In other words, Vygotsky's social learning theory (1934/2012, 1934/1978) supported the view that children learn through playful interaction with others, and therefore achieved their abilities to the next development stage. Vygotsky (1934/2012, 1934/1978) referred this as the Zone of Proximate Development. Vygotsky's (1934/2012, 1934/1978) sociocultural approach also emphasised the role of the teacher whose responsibility is to support children's social learning as a part of their cognitive development. Vygotsky (1934/1978, 104) stated that when a child creates imaginary situations, he also develops his abstract thought.

> "The corresponding development of rules leads to actions on the basis of which the division between work and play becomes possible, a division encountered at school age as a fundamental fact. At school age play does not die away but permeates the attitude toward reality. It has its own inner continuation in school instruction and work (compulsory activity based on rules). It is the essence of play that a new relation is created between the field of meaning and the visual field-that is, between situations in thought and real situations." (Vygotsky, 1934/1978, 104)

Vygotsky (1934/1978, 104) made explicit the role that play has in cognitive or intellectual development. Furthermore, the child is able to take control of his own learning. Therefore, learning by playing or vice versa should not be excluded from curriculum or pedagogical activities too early. According to Smidt (2009, 106) success in schooling: "Depends on child's ability to go beyond the concrete and into the abstract."

Educational philosopher, Friedrich Froebel (1923/2013), emphasised the child's own interest and believed that when a child is emerged in his activities this will develop into intelligence and character. Therefore, the importance was on the growth of knowledge from inside rather than from outside the child (Hargreaves et al., 2015, 308).

> "We possess a great load of extraneous knowledge, which has been imposed on us and which we foolishly strive daily to increase … we have very little knowledge of our own that has originated in our own mind and grown with it." (Froebel, 1923/2013, 156)

To achieve this Froebel saw the importance of socialisation, learning by doing and play, as: "A highest stage of a child's development" (Froebel, 1923/2013).

Taken together, the substantial results of these studies, suggest that young children's curricula now include high academic components which are linked to the higher demanding goals and targets. It is also questionable whether the: pass or fail test, will help children, for the rest of their life, feeling confident with their education. Controversially, the developmental theories imply that the children should instead participate in the appropriate learning opportunities. Heighten goals and targets have also possibly impacted teachers. Therefore, the next part will explore how practitioners' pedagogy might have changed.

3.1.3 Changes in Teachers' Pedagogy

> *"It makes me really sad, cause you don't come into teaching to…to do that to children, really. So yeah."* – English teacher, Irene –

The early years teacher could be described as: "A practitioner of the pedagogy who brings it into life for his learners" (Smith, 2012, n/a).

Alexander (2009, 2) has asserted:

> "Pedagogy is a complex field of practice, theory and research in its own right. The challenge of comparative pedagogy is to marry the study of education elsewhere with the study of teaching and learning in a way which respects both of these fields of enquiry yet also creates something which is more than the sum of their parts." (Alexander, 2009, 2)

In essence, pedagogy could be understood as simply teaching. Alexander (2009, 5) proposed that: "Teaching, in any setting, is the act of using method x to enable students to learn y." Smith (2012, n/a) however expounded a wider view of teaching, considering pedagogy as: "A complex activity, which encompasses more than just delivering education."

A number of years ago Wrigley (2005, 229) examined changes in curricular content and pedagogies and asserted that: "It has become increasingly difficult to think outside the frame, especially perhaps for younger teachers who have known nothing else." This insight is of particular importance since a growing body of literature recognises the significance of children's learning through play opportunities (Weisberg et al., 2015; Mathers et al., 2014; Lamy, 2013; Campbell et al., 2012, 1035; Jalongo and Sobolak, 2011; St. Clair-Christman et al., 2011; Reynolds and Ou, 2010, 1050).

According to Broadhead (2004, 14) initial teacher training was revised in England in the latter part of the 1990's, after which revision focus was upon delivering subject knowledge rather than developing understanding of play-based learning. Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (DfEE, 1997) explicitly stated:

> “We have placed particular priority on the early years and on raising standards of literacy and numeracy as essential keys to unlocking access and achievement across the curriculum.” (DfEE, 1997, 3)

Although teacher training has changed after this time period, it has left its legacy focusing on literacy and numeracy strategies (Broadhead, 2004, 14).

Furthermore, governments can attempt to constrain the teaching practices by requiring adherence to preferred pedagogies or “trying to drill learning into people according to some plan often drawn up by others” (Smith, 2012, n/a). One could ask whether this has affected young teachers' limited imaginary of teaching and what it means to be a teacher. For example, if teachers are not taught to understand how play promotes learning, they most probably will not benefit from it in their pedagogy simply through unawareness (Broadhead, 2004, 14). Pedagogy therefore: “Can quickly descend into treating learners like objects, things to be acted upon rather than people to be related to” (Smith, 2012, n/a).

An Australian study by Lord and McFarland (2010) examined the experiences of three primary teacher education students in early childhood subject and play sessions. The study included looking at the students’ perceptions of early childhood, primary education philosophy, and pedagogy. Analysis of the focus group interviews revealed that the participants were indeed aware of differences in teaching approaches as compared to the primary school setting (Lord and McFarland, 2010, 7). The study produced related evidence and suggested that primary teachers’ education did not display an understanding or appreciation of how to apply developmentally appropriate learning opportunities (Lord and McFarland, 2010, 7).

One approach to resolving the conflict of age-appropriateness and curricular demands would be to consider and design activities that deliver specific learning objectives in a manner that engages the child-learner. This would include a range of first-hand experiences involving activities appropriate for six-year-olds generally at this developmental stage, but which also allow for individual differences in development. Teamwork, games, coordination and turn-taking could be activities designed to strengthen socio-emotional and physical development, such as self-

regulation. Word games, jokes, riddles, rhymes, storytelling, songs and tongue twisters could be utilized as a means of enhancing cognitive (thinking) skills and language development. Actively listening to children, providing conversational opportunities, reading and singing with them are important elements in applying pedagogy to curriculum demands. The solution is a teacher viewed as a facilitator, inspirer and motivator who stimulates the children's interest, and provides age appropriate learning opportunities, and is capable of offering a variety of learning experiences at many levels.

In conclusion to this section I would like to present two illustrative examples of play-based activities in an outdoor setting. These two examples are from Finland and ones in which I personally have been involved. The first example takes place in a forest nearby the preschool, was greatly enjoyed by the children, and used to teach numbers.

To begin with the teacher told an imaginative story about a mother caterpillar in the woods who had lost her ten babies and did not know where to find them. Previous to this the teacher had hidden ten pieces of yarn about the forest. The children were then allowed into the forest to search for these ten pieces of yarn. If, for example, only seven were found, it was time for reflection guided by adult intervention: "How many more babies are lost? What shall we do?"

This exploration was underpinned by the essential role of play in children's learning and development (pedagogy of play). It was a very popular task with the children, involving emotive elements and thus better-fixed in their memory. The children felt it was really important that the caterpillar mom got her babies back.

My second example involves children fetching certain amounts of something, for example five leaves and three stones. After finding the objects the next task was to place these in specific places; leaves inside a circle or stones inside a triangle drawn on the forest floor. In these activities children not only reinforced their concepts of amounts and shapes, they also, simultaneously were able to practise their social skills (social behaviour, social relationships), physical skills, mathematical and thinking skills, and perhaps a number of other skills not immediately obvious to an observer.

According to Alexander (2010, 305) young children's cognitive development is strongly linked to language. Therefore, their social development needs "productive relationships and collaborative learning" (Alexander, 2010, 305-306). This will enable children to learn from each other as well as from the teacher, offering them a voice. In addition to these benefits, the freedom of exploration in the forest created a happy and liberated atmosphere for the children. Learning this way was also emphasised by Froebel. "His concept of self-activity to self-fulfilment acquired through garden activities, which brought young children into contact with the soil, weather, plants and animals"(Jarvis et al., 2017 34). All of which allowed learning to develop naturally and in due course.

Praise is another tool appropriate to any curriculum. Praising children increases motivation for discovery, expands their operational space and freedom to do those things that children, and individual children, are excited about.

The pedagogy of any curriculum should not be offered top-down (teacher-child) but practised in partnership with children.

> "The learner is in the centre of change, and the focus of learning moves away from the teacher, textbooks and teaching, and towards a learner-centred, learning process-based and personalised learning." (Silander, 2015, 1)

If the learning targets are developmentally demanding – especially for young children – these may demotivate them, resulting in feelings of failure. Therefore, to aid school readiness and reduce the chance of feeling failure, activity sequencing should be incorporated into the pedagogy, so that demands increase in small increments. This is a simple means of maximising the chance of success at each stage and achieving curricular demands.

In short, a play-based pedagogy approach to learning and teaching will enhance children's educational experiences and intensify their school readiness. Therefore, pre-school and primary school teacher education should include child developmental theories, didactics and pedagogical modules.

Another possible factor in a teacher's pedagogy could be teacher-age related. According to Organisation for Economic Co-operations and Development (OECD,

2019a, 6) the average age of the teaching workforce in the United Kingdom is the youngest across OECD countries. “Nearly one-third of primary teachers (31%) are aged 30 or younger, compared to 13% on average across” (OECD, 2019a, 6). This could suggest that without the relevant knowledge and *experience*, young children’s education could lack knowledgeable teachers. The study by Lord and McFarland (2010, 9) seems to concur with this view in stating that primary teacher education students: “Expressed some difficulties with making the connection between learning and play as their primary teacher education course had not addressed this.”

Furthermore, Graham (2011, 256) investigated a small sample of teacher-education students and aimed to understand the relationship between the nature and context of student-teachers’ learning and their professional development as novice teachers (Graham, 2011, 256). Graham pointed out that University-based Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England remains as a significant component in the preparation of intending teachers (UCAS, 2020a). Education is engaged with a politically driven compliance culture, e.g. policy intervention, external scrutiny, and public accountability. The educational culture has influenced a teacher education curriculum so that it has to comply with a list of suitable evidence against the Teachers' Standards (2012) which the professional competencies of new teachers can be measured (University of Worchester, 2012). Therefore, according to Graham (2011, 250)

> “At one level it makes available a highly valued repertoire of practical skills which students draw upon; but, at another level, it should also communicate an accessible set of personal values and vision in learning and teaching which help to inform and shape the professional identities of new teachers.” (Graham, 2011, 250)

Graham (2011, 264) pointed out that the compliance culture had: “A significant impact on students’ emerging professional identities and on their values as teachers which extends beyond the subject matter itself.”

As stated earlier, western schools tend to focus on academic content and standardised tests which: “Pressures teachers to train successful test takers at ever younger ages” (Nicolopoulou, 2010, 2). Basford and Bath (2014, 126) considered that assessment can dictate teacher’s pedagogy.

> “Practitioners find themselves trying to make learning a more collaborative endeavour whilst being under increasing pressure to provide ‘evidence’ of learning at a set point in time and that such competing demands pull them in contradictory directions.” (Basford and Bath, 2014, 126)

When children’s learning is goal-directed with the curriculum guidelines it might propose a dilemma for the teachers (Wallerstedt and Pramling, 2012, 5). For example, Skilbeck (2017, 4) explored John Dewey’s writings about play, playfulness, teaching, work and curriculum. Skilbeck (2017, 4) identified, through Dewey, that play, and its qualities have become: “Divided and displaced in contemporary industrial society.”

> “The principle of freedom of intelligence...affect both of the elements of school life: teachers and pupil...and the growth and extension of the democratic principle in life beyond school doors.” (Dewey, 1903, 193)

Maybe the problems have been there perpetually as it appears that the curricula and pedagogy still offer: “Distorted and divided educational experiences” for children (Skilbeck, 2017, 4). All children are clearly not ready for academic content and formal learning methods.

In my professional experience all children cannot cope with a strict pace and may struggle in the classroom environment. I also consider that if a teachers’ pedagogics persist very formally, this might impact on lowering children’s self-esteem and their self-belief as a competent learner. This view is supported by Stipek (2006, 456), who indicated that increased focus on academics, may: “Undermine child’s enthusiasm for learning and affect negatively their academic performance.” Furthermore, this might affect destructively on child’s behaviour and self-esteem. Pretti-Frontczak, et al. (2016, 50) reminded us that educational policies and practices should avoid expecting all children to be developmentally the same and be able to perform the same skills at the same age.

It appears that current teacher training may not emphasise enough developmentally appropriate practices or educate about the importance of play-based learning in six-year-olds education. Evidently, developmentally appropriate practice and the curricula policy changes should be positive for all involved.

Accordingly, the following section will elaborate upon key issues along with developmentally appropriate practices (DAP). It will examine how curricular practices may promote these and contemplate whether or not there is an ideal curriculum for young children.

3.1.4 Curricula and Developmentally Appropriate Practice

> *"Vygotsky on sanonut että, leikkissä lapsi on päätään pidempi niin, leikki on se oikea niinkun tapa."* – Finnish teacher, Ursula –
>
> *"Vygotsky has said that, when playing, the kid is taller than his head, so play is the way to go."*

The curricula and understanding of how children develop and learn, impacts on a teachers' pedagogy and, as an outcome, how educators plan and apply their teaching (Murray and Passy, 2014; Wood and Bennett, 1997). Bingham and Whitebread (2012) have captured the notion of children's learning agreeably:

> "No longer do we perceive of the child needing to be 'taught' in order to learn and develop, but as a being with the innate systems for self-regulation that mature over time within appropriate contexts." (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012, 50)

This quotation indicates that the curricula and pedagogy need to be developmentally appropriate practise (DAP) so that children are able to grow and learn naturally. Katz (2010, 2) endorsed the awareness of an ideal curriculum for young children which should encourage children's in-born intellectual dispositions. The appropriate curricula support children's own interests and leads to inspiring opportunities, experimental findings and allows children: "To make the best sense they can of their own experiences and their own environments" (Katz, 2010, 2). It is well established (Bassok et al., 2016, 1; Sylva and Pugh, 2005, 14; Ashton, 2004) as stated earlier, that high-quality settings can do all this and help children to progress and gain the necessary school readiness skills on their journey, and finally enter school with the pertinent academic skills. Kelly (2009, 14) also emphasises the role of the skilful teacher who can adapt and develop curriculum

correspondingly to school's unique characteristic. Possibly, it could be argued: "That children's skills and abilities …are dependent on the support and stimulation they have experienced prior to coming to school" (Scott-Little et al., 2006, 155).

Therefore, curricula and developmentally appropriate practice needs to recognise young children's existing physical, social and emotional and cognitive development (Thomas, 2017; DfE, 2017) which all affect the state of the child's learning readiness and competence. The children's concept of development can be divided into two major dimensions: "normative and dynamic" (Katz, 1999, 2).

> "The normative dimension concerns the typical or normal capabilities as well as limitations of most children of a given age within a given cultural milieu. The dynamic dimension concerns the sequence and changes that occur in all aspects of the child's functioning with the passage of time and increasing experience, and how these changes interact dynamically." (Katz, 1999,45)

These dimensions need to be in balance with each child's development for the best outcomes. Furthermore, developmentally appropriate practice should consider respectively of social relationships with peers and educators, which have an impact on child's social-emotional learning (Usakli and Ekici, 2018, 72) …rather than highlighting academic content (Scott-Little et al., 2006, 164). Research has shown that by supporting social-emotional learning (SEL) and offering supportive interventions, it is possible to improve children's social-emotional behaviours (Classen and Cheatham, 2015, 29). Appropriate support, therefore, develops pupils' skills to recognise and encounter with their emotions, self-regulation and to understand the perspectives of others (Greenberg et al., 2003, 468). "When we consider about the improvement of social relations of a child, we should think about all developmental stages among individual level as well" (Usakli and Ekici, 2018, 71). Scott-Little, et al. (2006,164) stated that if importance is given to the academic content without paying attention to social-emotional development it: "May be ignoring a specific set of skills and abilities that are particularly important to later school success." One way of achieving these social-emotional competences is amending play to learning. According to American study by Hanline, et al. (2008, 19) play promotes learning across

developmental areas, including social-emotional development. Foremost, developmentally appropriate curriculum supports children's own interests and therefore tends to lead to better learning.

However, developmentally appropriate practices for six-year olds might have been compromised because of how young teachers are prepared for their profession, the changes in curricula and testing. Therefore, the next part will investigate curriculum assessment policy and how six-year-old children's school achievement is evaluated in England and Finland. Assessment practices are an integral part of both countries: English Standards and Testing Agency (STA) and Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI). Equally, assessing children's learning standards remain mandatory, and both countries apply formal and informal assessments throughout the year. The next section will explore the variations of how these assessments are implemented between these two countries.

3.2 Assessing Six-Year-Old Children's School Achievement

> *"Et ei me varsinaisesti mitään testejä tehdä."* – Finnish teacher, Ulla –
> *"We don't do tests as such."*

Anxieties of formal schooling and particularly test taking concerns parents, children and educators, especially when a child might not be developmentally ready (Guddemi et al., 2014, 1). According to Stevens and DeBord (2001, 1), "Often in an effort to design an accountability system, the developmental level of the child seems lost." One reason this might happen is that collected data is processed and simplified to figures and labels therefore, possibly loosing: "The multifaceted nature of learning" (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017, 70). Nevertheless, assessing and testing children's learning standards are mandatory procedures in England (STA, 2018a, 2). Interestingly, children in England experience more testing than many of their counterparts internationally (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017, 77). Relatedly, assessing and testing children's learning standards are mandatory procedures in England (STA, 2018a, 2).

Similarly, assessment practices are an integral part of Finnish pre-school teachers' responsibilities (FNBE, 2016). Both countries apply formal and informal assessments throughout the year.

Several studies have discovered that assessing and testing can be very unreliable with young children under the age of eight (Kim and Suen, 2003, 547; Stevens and DeBord, 2001, 4).

> "…the same child may score well on a particular test on one day and fail the same test miserably the next day because of illness, apprehension, unexpected events, or out-of-school conditions that the test administrator is unaware of." (Miller and Almon, 2009, 42)

Furthermore, Miller and Almon (2009, 42) claimed that young children's cognitive development might not be matured enough to comprehend highly toned tests.

> "Trying to assess children who are not yet sufficiently emotionally competent is highly problematic, as it can lead to the establishment of low expectations for a child's whole educational career." (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017, 77)

Moreover, any test results are usually influenced by other variables, such as, pupils with different background characteristics, poverty, gender, test conditions and test types (Kim and Suen, 2003, 548). "When selecting an instrument, it is imperative to understand if the instrument assesses readiness of children in relation to a set of criteria or against a standardized population norm" (Britto and Limlingan, 2012, 25). Therefore, precision is advised when gathering – especially – conclusions on any young children's assessment results. According to Bingham and Whitebread (2012, 5) assessing children with standardised tests may result that: "Many children being labelled as being in some way 'deficient' and impedes teachers' abilities to see the child's potential". For children, this can be problematic as they are still forming their disposition towards education. If labelled, this may impact on their confidence as a learner (Palmer, 2009, 7; Tyre et al., 2006, 35). Further consideration should be given to teachers' assessments and judgement because they know the children and their families. However, one could argue that teachers' different subjective experiences, understandings and interpretations could lead to highly personalised judgements. However, Bradbury

and Roberts-Holmes (2017, 73) considered assessing children without sociable context as being disrespectful and unsupportive towards young children's voices and not really expressing what they might be capable of doing.

The next parts will explore the six-year-old children's assessment practices in England and Finland.

3.2.1 Assessments and Testing in England, Year 2

> *"The assessment now should be, ermmm…just happening all the time. All the time in every single lesson."* – English teacher, Olivia –

In England the National Curriculum and new National Curriculum Assessment system was introduced in 1988 by Department of Education and Science (DES, 1988, 91; Torrance, 2018, 4). The national testing system involved testing all children at ages 7, 11 and 14 in English, Maths and Science in the end of the school year (DES, 1988, 91) (Appendix 2). Originally four criteria were set up to…

> a) "…give direct information about pupils' achievement in relation to objectives" b) "…provide a basis for decisions about pupils' further learning needs" c) "…be capable of comparison across classes and schools" and d) "…relate to pupil's progression." (DES, 1988, 7-8) (Appendix 2)

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA, 2018) defines assessment as:

> "…the systematic collection, interpretation and use of information about learning. It gives teachers a better awareness of what pupils know and understand, what their learning experiences enable them to do and what their skills and personal capabilities are." (CCEA, 2018, n/a)

In England, schools are recommended by Standards and Testing Agency (STA): "To develop their own approach to assessment which meets the needs of their pupils, parents, staff and curriculum" (STA, 2018b, 7).

> "Statutory teacher assessment at the end of the key stage is just one part of the broader assessments that teachers make. There are three main forms of assessment in schools:
>
> 1. Day-to-day formative assessment – to inform teaching on an ongoing basis.
> 2. In-school summative assessment – to understand pupil performance at the end of a period of teaching.
> 3. National statutory summative assessment – to understand pupil performance in relation to national expectations and comparisons." (STA, 2018b, 7)

Usually Year 2 teachers choose the possible tests together with the headteacher or the curriculum leaders. The exception to this is the mandatory formal assessment: Standard Assessment Tasks, commonly known as SATs (STA, 2018a, 2). SATs take place at the end of the Key Stage 1. "The children sit National Curriculum tests in English and Maths" (STA, 2018a, 2). According to STA (2018a, 2), "Children may also sit an optional test in English grammar, punctuation and spelling." In England, STA (2018c, 1-10) provides detailed guidance for teachers on how to apply the assessments (Appendix 3). The SAT-tests help teachers to measure a child's performance and identify their needs. The test results are used to compare national expected standards (STA, 2018a, 2).

In 2014 the English government removed levels which were used to report children's attainment and progress earlier (DfE, 2014c, 2-3). By removing levels, the government aimed to create greater flexibility in the way that teachers plan and assess pupils' learning (DfE, 2014c, 2). "All maintained schools will be free to develop a curriculum relevant to their pupils" (DfE, 2014c, 2), however…

> "…the curriculum must include an assessment system which enables schools to check what pupils have learned and whether they are on track to meet expectations at the end of the key stage, and to report regularly to parents." (DfE, 2014c, 2-3)

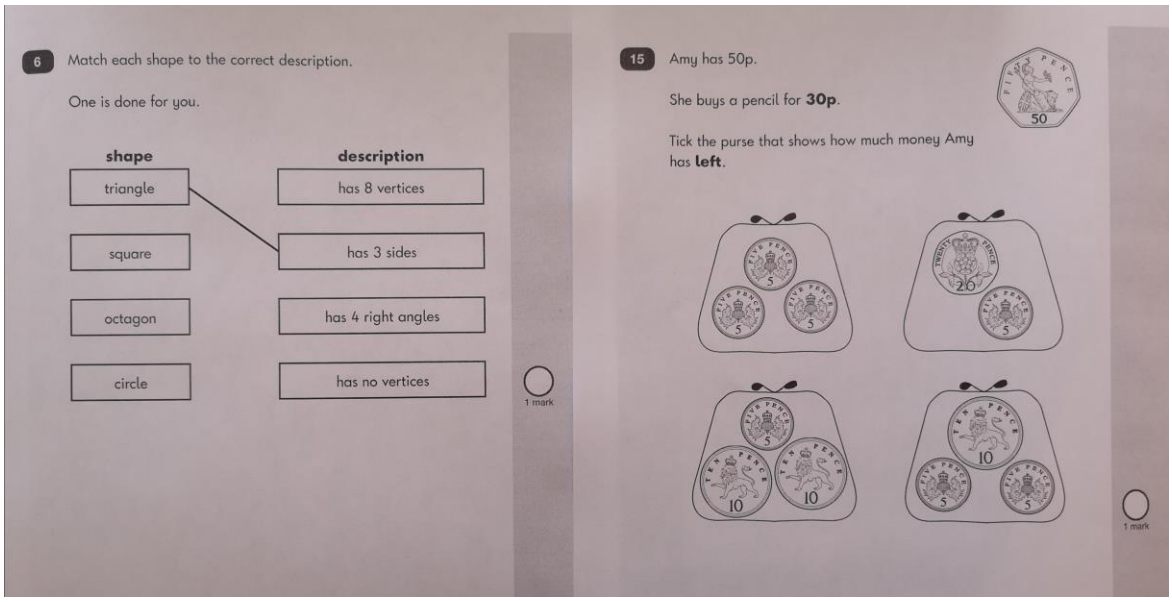


Figure 1: *Example of Year 2 Maths SAT-test in England* (STA, 2019).

Teachers are responsible for developing and monitoring pupils progress through the programmes of study for each national curriculum subject. Teachers also need to make sure that pupils have grasped the information and that they are ready to move on to the next level (DfE, 2014a). Testing pupils helps to detect if the required knowledge is achieved. However, this might lead to unwanted practises. For example, Wrigley (2015, 9) has pointed out that: “New assessment requirements will have a distorting and narrowing effect, and lead to teaching to the test.” Also, some children might not be mature enough to focus within the time limits set by the tests. Furthermore, Guddemi, et al. (2014, 1) argued that: “Increased testing will not facilitate the greater learning process.”

Tim Oates (DfE, 2014d) from Cambridge Assessment explained that the changes to the National Curriculum were necessary and therefore assessments needed to change too. Assessments should reflect on whether children understand the key concepts, rather than achieve particular levels and move up fast a phase to the next level. In this video, Oats (DfE, 2014d) claimed that when allowing children to study at the right phase, they can establish deeper and more secure understanding in their learning. Oats argued that the past level system made children label themselves. According to Oats (DfE, 2014d) this created dysfunctional learning and held back children’s progress. Finally, Oats (DfE, 2014d) claimed that the assessments used to be insufficient, and it was not the

right kind of assessment. Oats (DfE, 2014d) recommended more varied range of assessments that are supportive in their nature and show children's real learning.

Interestingly, on 30 March 2017 the English government launched a consultation about removing the SATs. On 14 September 2017 Standards and Testing Agency confirmed that the test will be made non-statutory at the earliest possible point, from the 2022 to 2023 academic year (STA, 2017, n/a).

The next part will move on to explore Finnish pre-primary assessment practices.

3.2.2 Assessments and Testing in Finnish Pre-Primary School

> *"Lapsen oma-arviointi, sitten tämmöset ryhmässä tehtävät arvioinnit, pohdinnat. Ja sitten se aikuisen havainnointi."*
> – Finnish teacher, Birgitta –
>
> *"The child's self-assessment, then these group assessments, reflections. And then practitioners' observations."*

In Finland, children are also assessed but there are no national compulsory tests at the age of six. It is also important to note that none of the test results are employed to compare national expected standards or published online. After pre-primary school the assessments are based on verbal or numerical evaluation or a combination of these in accordance with the individual school's decision (FNBE, 2016, 51). These assessments are relevant to parents and students and are not published publicly.

The assessments in pre-primary classroom are done in less formal ways throughout the year: "…observations, documentation, assessment conclusions and feedback in which other pre-primary education personnel, children and guardians participate in addition to teachers" (FNBE, 2016, 37). When assessment or the "test" takes place, the evaluation is largely based on the practitioner's own training and experience regarding the development of the child (Halonen, 2008, 4).

Assessments are used as a tool for instruction and learning and *are specified in the local curriculum* e.g. feedback received from children and guardians is used to maintain and develop the quality of pre-primary education (FNBE, 2016, 57-58). The Child's Pre-school Learning Plan (lapsen esiopetuksen opetussuunnitlema) is made for all the pre-school children together with the parents in the autumn of the beginning of the operating period (Appendix 4). The meetings with the parents/guardians are held at least twice a year and the child participates in them (Peda.net, 2016a). This *could be* done by co-operating, for example, the child's observation tool called: Eskarin Arki (Peda.net, 2016b). (Appendix 5).

> "Eskarin Arki is designed in collaboration with a psychologist, occupational therapist, speech therapist and two special schoolteachers. It is a tool for the everyday life of pre-school education, with the central idea of systematic observation and evaluation, as well as everyday support for the child's learning ability. The point of view is the child's learning process and adult's role is guiding it. The tool allows participants to identify the early risk factors of learning and to plan the child's support individually. Comprehensive observations also reveal the child's strengths. Eskarin Arki includes clear observation forms and a section that combines support measures with the findings. Forms can be used in pre-school education and in cross-sectoral co-operation to plan pedagogical support for the child." (Peda.net, 2016b)

Finnish pre-school teachers are free to choose the possible tests. It is important to understand that when employing the word, test, in pre-primary schools it is mainly about gathering information on how to plan the children's activities or making rough-screening estimates (Halonen, 2008, 2). In pre-primary settings assessments are used for planning and developing education and: "To support the well-being, growth and learning of each child" (FNBE, 2016, 37). I have included the following examples of the tests for the reason that these were mentioned when interviewing teachers in Finland. The first test which teachers could possibly utilise is called: The Controlled Drawing Observation (CDO) (Krogh, 1977).

The Controlled Drawing Observation (CDO) was created in Denmark by Krogh (1978), and it was brought to Finland by Pirkko Liikanen (Liikanen, 1984). CDO is used to generate quantitative data via children's drawing activity. The test's main

purpose is to discover the children's school readiness level. In addition, the CDO could be used to determine:

1. The child's level of development
2. Working' habits (e.g. concentration)
3. Understanding language
4. Auditory memory
5. Visual-motor development (fine motor skills)
6. The concept of numerical competence
7. Understanding the formation of shapes
8. Possible emotional problems (Krogh, 1977)

The activity itself follows these instructions:

Inform the children they need to listen very carefully. The instructions will be said only once. Instructions are only auditorial. A4-paper.

1. Draw a small ball in the middle of the paper.

2. Draw a line from the ball to the corner of the paper.

3. Draw the same kind of line from the ball to the other corners.

QUESTIONS:

How many boxes are there on your paper?

CONTINUE WITH THE ACTIVITY:

4. Draw a line from the ball to the side of the paper.

5. Draw the same kind of line from the ball to all the other sides.

QUESTIONS:

How many boxes are there now on your paper?

CONTINUE WITH THE ACTIVITY:

Next you can draw something in the boxes. You can choose the box to start in. Listen very carefully to what you are told to draw in each box.

6. Inside one box draw three lines. The lines are not the same length.

7. In the next box draw three triangles. The triangle in the middle is the smallest.

8. In the next box draw four circles. Two of the circles are the same size. Mark the same sized circles with an X.

9. Now, draw four squares in a row. The square on the end is the biggest.

BREAK (if needed)

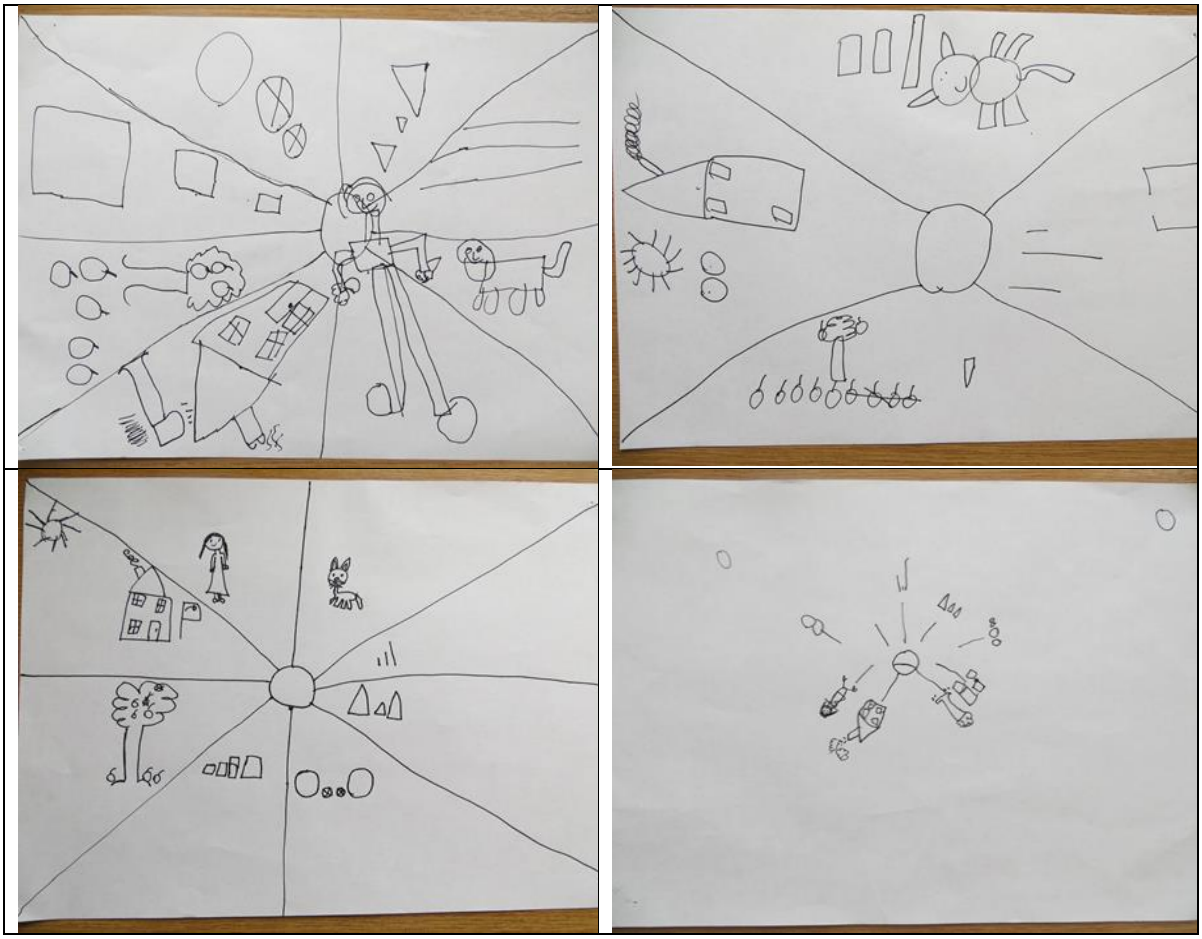
Now I am going to give you longer instructions. Listen carefully!

10. In the next empty box draw a tree. It is an apple tree. There are three apples on the tree and five on the ground.

11. In the next empty box draw a house. In the house there are three windows and a door. The roof of the house is pointed. There is a chimney on the roof and smoke is coming out of it. Next to the house is a flag waving in the wind and the sun is shining.

12. Draw a picture of a person.

13. Draw a cat.



Picture 1: *Four Examples of Six-Year-Old Children's CDO-drawings.*

An Estonian study by Häidkind, et al. (2011, 64) examined how well CDO predicts children's achievement in comparison with teachers' reports and individual school readiness tests (mathematics and the Estonian language). Häidkind, et al. (2011, 64) employed 167 children and conducted the CDO-drawing in groups of 6–10 children. The instructions included a) orientation on paper (CDO_1), b) geometrical figures and a specific number of objects (CDO_2) c) daily objects (CDO_3) and

associated them with the observations of possible disruptive behaviour (Häidkind et al., 2011, 66). Furthermore, the researchers carried out several forward-stepwise multiple regression analyses to confirm the CDO's suitability to predict academic achievement (Häidkind et al*.,* 2011, 69). The results showed that all three parts of CDO had high correlations with individual tests and the teachers' evaluations. The results also found that:

> "In kindergarten the correlation was the strongest between CDO_3 and the teacher reports; the results of mathematics and the Estonian language at the end of the first grade had the strongest correlation with CDO_2 and the teacher reports. The regression analysis showed that of the different methods academic achievement was best predicted by CDO, next by teacher reports and least of all by individual tests." (Häidkind et al., 2011, 71)

Interestingly, the study discovered that a child's disruptive behaviour during the CDO-activity predicted the results in the Estonian language test, however the teachers' reports had no predictive power on a child's behaviour and independence. The researchers concluded that: "Children's behaviour is more difficult to measure than their early achievement" (Häidkind et al*.,* 2011, 73). Study by Hamerslag, et al. (2018, 91) consisted of similar kinds of results and showed that if children experience socioemotional and behavioural problems these problems can translate into a consistent pattern of negative correlations with language and numeracy performance. Socioemotional and behavioural factors can influence academic success when adjusting to the school environment (Häidkind et al., 2011, 73; Hamerslag et al., 2018, 90). These outcomes support the assertion that if behavioural qualities are not developed this may represent an obstacle to formal, structured learning and therefore the child might not yet be ready for school (Hamerslag et al., 2018, 91-92). This study supports my view that six-year-old children should be guided towards school readiness with supportive play-based learning, free from the pressures of formal academic education and with a broader focus on child's socioemotional development as well as on reasonable academic skills.

The LukiMat-assessment was mentioned (when interviewing Finnish teachers) as another possible test. LukiMat: "The web-based service has two parts; one for

reading (Luki) and the other for mathematics (Mat)" (LukiMat, 2018). Teachers, educators and *parents* are able to apply learning assessment tools to assess children's mathematical or reading support needs. The service focuses on the development of the skills in children aged five to eight years (LukiMat, 2018).

The third possible test could be: "KUMMI 3. Lukemisen aika, leikin taika" (Figure 2) (Mäkinen, 2003, n/a). The first part of the series deals with reading comprehension and the second part of the test with attention deficit disorder. The aim of the exercises presented in the book is to stimulate curiosity in the written language and speech structure. The activities emphasise the importance of movements and imagination and they have been designed for use before the actual reading lessons. The exercises are well suited for beginners who are starting to practise their reading and with the readers who are slow to read. The book is aimed at special education teachers, pre-school teachers, kindergarten teachers, psychologists and therapists (Mäkinen, 2003, n/a).

Figure 2: Example of Pre-School Test in Finland

3.2.3 Short Conclusions on Assessment and Testing Practises

> *"But obviously I've still got some restrictions and I still need to get them through the SATs. I still need to prove progress."*
> – English teacher, Olivia –

It may be concluded, that the observations, assessments and tests are mandatory procedures and practices of both English and Finnish education. Both countries apply formal and informal assessments throughout the year. In England, Year 2 children are involved in mandatory SAT-tests and less formal testing around the year (DES, 1988, 91). English teachers choose their tests independently or

together with the other teaching staff. SAT-tests are compulsory and dictated by the educational authorities. In Finland the pre-primary school assessments are mainly used to utilise information on how to plan on the children's activities or making rough-screening estimates (Halonen, 2008, 2). Finnish pre-school teachers are free to choose the possible tests.

When considering young children's assessments, several academics (Guddemi et al., 2014, 1; Kim and Suen, 2003; Stevens and DeBord, 2001, 4) have pointed out their concerns, that children under eight might not really understand the reasons for testing. Furthermore, particularly test taking can be very unreliable because it is a snapshot at one point in time and gives only partial picture of a child's abilities (Stevens and DeBord, 2001, 4). The test results may direct teachers to the wrong conclusions and consequently label the child's skills incorrectly (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012, 5; Miller and Almon, 2009, 42; Palmer, 2009, 7). Several studies over the years (Frans et al., 2019, 15-16; Fleege et al., 1992, 20; Wodtke et al., 1989, 223), have also questioned the age appropriateness and confirmed the discernible stress and anxiety in young children experience during testing, moreover, these experiences might lead later to the mental health disorders.

The next section will explore English National Curriculum and the expectations for Year 2 children.

3.3 England – The National Curriculum - Year 2

> *"The previous curriculum was better than the current new National Curriculum. I don't think there was anything wrong with the old National Curriculum, at all."* – English, teacher, Beth –

In England, the most recent National Curriculum was introduced in September 2014 and updated in December 2014 (DfE, 2015). Former education secretary Michael Gove (Richardson, 2014, n/a) indicated that these changes were required so England can maintain the progression with the most successful education

systems in the world. Therefore, the new National Curriculum sets out expectations for children that match the curricula used in the world's most successful school systems (DfE, 2013b). To achieve this, the English government is keeping up with the latest educational developments and as a result, the curriculum is revised relentlessly. According to the Department for Education (DfE, 2013a), the main aim for education is to prepare pupils for a better life after school. However, according to Mikus, et al. (2020, 198), "students, who are not socialized into the preferences, attitudes, and behaviours of the middle class, hence will struggle to conform to the expectations of the educational system." For instance: "Reading behaviour is considered as a form of cultural capital and is at the same time of intrinsic value because it contributes to children's reading and language skills" (Mikus et al., 2020, 198). The term "cultural capital" could be associated with the relation to education (Mikus et al., 2020, 198; Ofsted, 2019a, 8; Bourdieu,1986, 242) – the skills and knowledge children need to prepare them for their future life successes.

In England, Key Stage 1 (KS1) is the legal term for the two years of schooling in maintained schools. The students are mostly aged between 5 and 7 (Year 1 and 2). Children under 5 start Reception (R) class when they are four years old. The law requires children to be in full time education, following the child's 5th birthday (Education Act 1996, s.56, § 8(3)). Yet, if a child is a summer-born, s/he can be as young as four years of age when they begin their primary education. The National Curriculum stipulates an outline of core knowledge. The National Curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge that they will need to be educated citizens in the key subject disciplines (DfE, 2014a). The framework sets out twelve subjects, classified in legal terms as core and other foundation subjects (Appendix 3).

The revised National Curriculum for England emphasises the stronger role of the teacher to be a facilitator and take a bigger role in planning and implementing the curriculum (Sewell et al., 2018). The new curriculum challenges teachers, inviting them to go beyond The National Curriculum specifications as The National Curriculum is expected to be just one part of the elements (DfE, 2014a). According to the National Curriculum: "Teachers can develop exciting and

stimulating lessons to promote the development of pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills as part of the wider school curriculum" (DfE, 2014a). However, Clark (2018, 80) claimed that teachers' might not be able to experience professional autonomy whilst teaching because of excessive testing, considerable workload and accountability. Clark (2018, 80) continued that: "Even the content of continuing professional development is dictated within narrow policy confines."

The new curriculum concentrates on improving literacy and numeracy standards early enough to subsequently prepare students properly for life after school (DfE, 2015). Andrew Pollard, who worked as member of the expert panel for the National Curriculum of England, argued that the curriculum denies teachers the scope to exercise their professional judgment (Vasagar, 2012). Contradictory to Pollard's statement the Department of Education claims that the new National Curriculum actually gives teachers autonomy and greater freedom to teach in the way they know works best (DfE, 2013b). Nick Gibb stated the following:

> "This government is emphatically on the side of teachers. We are freeing teachers from the constraints of government bureaucracy - and we want to go even further. We have challenged the orthodoxies that have undermined the teaching profession; and we are working to put evidence right at the heart of our education system to free teachers from having to kow-tow to such orthodoxies." (Gibb, 2014, n/a)

Department for Education (DfE) (2013b) suggests that teachers are welcome to apply their own judgement on how to teach children in their classroom. Therefore, teachers could adopt play as a learning tool in Year 2 since a steady amount of research supports the belief that the most natural way for young children is learning through play (Jacoby-Garrett, 2018, 24; Vogt et al., 2018, 592; Jones and Terry, 2017, 28). In reality, opportunities for play-based activities are scarce in 6-7-year-old children's classrooms in England. In many cases, play is observed as a contrasted and separated way of learning. In the other words, the way in which most of the learning opportunities for six-year-olds are offered, is in a formal approach: teacher-directed carpet time, lecturing children from the whiteboard along with paper and pen activities. In my professional experience, the word *play*

is not exercised in schools with older children, and play is often referred in other words, such as: *choosing time, discovery time* or *free zonetime*.

As affirmed earlier, the National Curriculum indicates that the teachers' have *freedom* to choose their pedagogy, but I would argue with this: how are teachers able to achieve this if the learning goals and the contents are fixed and targets need to be achieved? Developmentally appropriate practices might turn out potentially problematic if a teacher chooses a *wrong* pedagogical approach and is unable to prove children's progress and accountability. Following this, in a recent article, in the Times Educational Supplement (TES), Fairclough (2020, n/a) claimed that under Michael Gove's - the ex-secretary of state for education - the latest government directive has overly focused on English and Maths including more challenging tests. Because of this, many schools narrowed their curriculum (Fairclough, 2020, n/a). If the schools' test results drop and possibly fail an Ofsted inspection, this can lead to teachers living in fear. According to Fairclough (2020, n/a) "Heads continue to roll when results dip, or when a school fails its Ofsted inspection."

In conclusion, the English approach to 6-year-old children's curriculum framework appears to be vigorous, following teacher directed learning, focussed on the academic subjects. The National curriculum allows teachers' pedagogical freedom, whether this is practiced in the English Year 2s classrooms is another question. The next chapter will explore Finnish pre-primary curricula and its expectations for six-year-old children.

3.4 Finland – The National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education

> *"Uusi esiopetussuunnitelma ei ole tuntunut rajoittavalta...Leikin korostaminen on tuntunut todella mukavalta tuelta työhön."*
> – Finnish teacher, Ursula –
>
> *"The new pre-school curriculum hasn't felt restrictive...The emphasis on play has felt like a really nice support to my work."*

"The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland were introduced in 2005 by National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES, 2004). The core curriculum for pre-primary education was created in 2000 and renewed in 2010. The Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) implemented the new National Core Curricula for Pre-primary Education in August 2015. The starting point for the new The National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education 2014 (FNBE, 2016) was that:

> "...the current and future challenges brought on by the changes in the environment where children grow up and develop as well as the operating environment of pre-primary education." (FNBE, 2016, 8)

Therefore, children start their preschool at the age of six and formal school at the age of seven (Basic Education Act 628/1998). The pre-primary education aims to be a flexible continuum from early childhood education and care to basic education and is based on the needs of the child (FNBE, 2016, 81). Therefore, the six-year-old children engage for four hours a day, in mandatory preschool education, for 700hrs per year. FNBE's main aim for pre-primary education is to prepare the child for compulsory school (FNBE, 2016). A year before compulsory school, all six-year olds have a statutory right to enter free preschool education since 2001. Finnish children can attend early childhood education which is publicly provided by municipalities. According to The Finnish National Board of Education, pre-primary education has been compulsory since August 2015 (FNBE, 2016). "Local authorities decide whether pre-primary education is organised in an early

childhood education and care centre, a school or some other suitable location" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019a, n/a).

The local education authorities are obligated to prepare and develop their *own local curricula* based on the National Core Curricula (FNBE, 2016, 10).

> "The education provider shall ensure that pre-primary education personnel and guardians can participate in the formulation and development of the curriculum. Children's perspectives shall also be heard and utilised in the development." (FNBE, 2016, 19)

A school-based curriculum provides teachers and administrators the power to define values, purpose and overall educational targets for their own school, based on their professional judgment and the input of parents and the community (Sahlberg, 2012, 28).

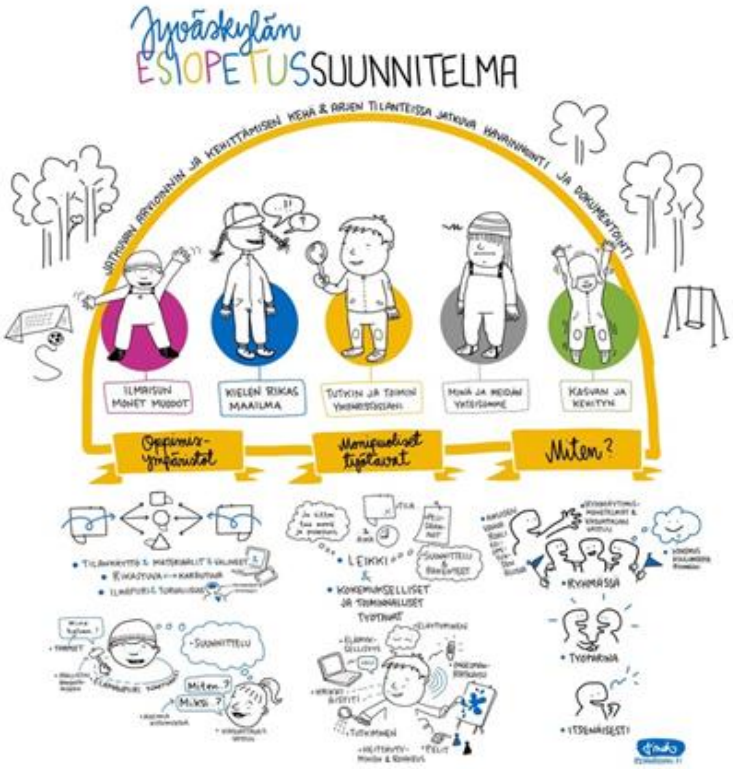
"Finnish pre-primary education is goal-oriented. The targets are determined by the core curriculum and the local curriculum prepared in accordance with it" (FNBE, 2016, 19). However, the curriculum does not set common targets for the level of knowledge or achievement of the children. Instead, as stated earlier, The Child's Pre-school Learning Plan is done together with the guardians and a child (Appendix 4). The plan is based on a child's strengths, needs and wishes which are then considered when planning and developing pedagogy (FNBE, 2016, 62).

As stated earlier, the Finnish teachers have freedom to interpret implementation of the curriculum framework. "Pre-primary education is based on the integrity of teaching. There are no subjects in pre-school education, but the teaching is carried out as a whole, which is based on the children's interests. Pre-primary education promotes the broad-based competence of children in the following areas.

- Thinking and learning
- Cultural knowledge, interaction and expression
- Self-care and everyday skills
- Multiple literacies
- ICT skills
- Participation and influence

The objectives of pre-primary education are defined as five entities:

- Many forms of expression
- Rich world of language
- Me and our community
- I research and work in my environment
- I grow and develop”



(National Board of Education, 2019, n/a).

Figure 3: *The Preschool Curriculum in Practice (Peda.net, 2016a)*

The above Figure 3 shows the pre-primary education as a part of the operational culture that supports the child’s growth and emphasis as an active learner (FNBE, 2016, 27). The Figure 3 also describes different learning environments, versatile working methods and assessment as a support method for further instruction and learning (FNBE, 2016, 35). “The curriculum for preschool is focused on a stimulating linguistic learning environment where there is a happy, open, encouraging, unhurried and aesthetically pleasing atmosphere” (Havu-Nuutinen

and Niikko, 2014, 624). According to FNBE (2016, 45). “The goal is that the children learn to appreciate human equality and their own uniqueness.” This is achieved by offering children opportunities for versatile interactions and strengthening their social skills, supporting their positive self-image and developing perceptions as a learner (FNBE, 2016, 45-46).

The settings where six-year-children are schooled, resembles a home more than an institution: pre-school settings are characterised by their homeliness including the interiors which replicate home decor (Havu-Nuutinen and Niikko, 2014, 625). I recall rocking chairs, curtains, sofas and cushions. Peltonen (1998, 97 and 2002) listed items as play and rest areas, learning games, play equipment and informal equipment such as group tables in the pre-school classrooms. Therefore, the environment offers possibilities for flexible play, games, storytelling sessions and crafts which has brought joy and life in schools (Peltonen, 1998, 123 and 2002).

In Finland young children’s educational pedagogy is based on the importance of play. Children ought to: “…learn by playing, moving, exploring, by working on different assignments, expressing themselves, and through activities based on arts” (FNBE, 2016, 22). The curriculum emphasises that new knowledge…[are] connected to children’s everyday life and the world they experience (FNBE, 2016, 22). Pre-primary curriculum focus is learning to: “Work in cooperation with others and set goals for their own and shared activities” (FNBE, 2016, 22) (Appendix 6).

Historically Finnish kindergartens were based on the Froebelian tradition: the importance of play and active learning (Virtanen, 2009, 66-67). Still today, pre-primary education supports children’s developmental stages and learning through play. The Finnish pre-primary education emphasises the child's individuality and the significance of active learning and the importance of acting as a group member. Play promotes children’s social skills and healthy self-esteem. “Pedagogy suitable for early childhood education and care is applied in pre-primary education, and children’s interests are respected in all activities” (FNBE, 2016, 18-19); and therefore, play in its different forms is a strong element in pre-primary education” (FNBE, 2016, 19).

Pre-school settings offer opportunities also for self-initiated play. Elkind (2008a, 2) indicated that children's curiosity, imagination and creativity need to be supported by various play opportunities. Since play skills develop whilst a child matures, it is: "Important to encourage them with age-appropriate challenges" (Elkind, 2008a, 2). I have observed many play situations with 6-7-years-old children in Finland. Their play skills increase, and they become, what I would call: *master players*. Developing into master players means that play situations can progress further within the peer groups, and practitioners' guidance, therefore, promoting shared reflection and self-directing learning together. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a concept formulated by Vygotsky (1934/1978), supports this theoretical stance. Vygotsky (1934/1978) perceived play as a social interaction (children playing together) and believed children learn about themself through their interactions with others.

> "Consequently, a complex of originally undeveloped features comes to the fore at the end of play development features that had been secondary or incidental in the beginning occupy a central position at the end, and vice versa." (Vygotsky, 1934/1978, 103)

When a child is attending a high-quality setting and supported by qualified teacher it is more likely this will extend a child's play skills further.

In pre-school, self-directed play does not indicate than children can do what they want. In Finland, all children need and, learn also, from formal instructions. However, these instructions need to be balanced between the children and skilful educator who acts as a facilitator.

Learning through play is recognised across The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (FNBE, 2016). The curriculum states the general objectives of education and learning (Appendix 6). I consider the following paragraph as a crucial part of the child's learning:

> "Through play and activity in different learning environments, children expand their competence in different fields of knowledge and skills…The goal is that the children learn to appreciate human equality and their own uniqueness." (FNBE, 2016, 12)

According to the Basic Education Act 628/1998, education shall be provided according to the pupil's age and capabilities to promote healthy child development (FNBE, 2016). The emphasis is on the child's growth and learning rather than mere achievement or tick boxing of objectives.

The Finnish pre-primary education groups: "May include at most 13 children if there is one teacher or at most 20 children if there is another adequately trained adult besides the teacher in the group" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019a, n/a). The small group sizes could facilitate teachers' pedagogy more thoroughly, as there is more time to support an individual child.

The next chapter will examine how English and Finnish curricula contributes to outdoor learning environments. Waller (2006, 97) noticed that the outdoor environment benefited both staff and children as a meaningful learning environment; facilitating children's independent role and helping them to construct their own learning and dispositions. According to Martin, et al. (2018, 245), "Time spent outdoors has been proven to benefit individuals of all ages mentally and physically." Employing the outside as a learning ground/environment among six-year-year olds differs profoundly in comparison between England and Finland. Finnish pre-primary education personnel are able to choose their pedagogical practices, which are called *versatile working methods* (e.g. play, investigations, exploration), freely together with children and choose an appropriate teaching style to implement this. Activities are developed to promote inclusion and to support cultural diversity (FNBE, 2016, 90).

3.5 English and Finnish Curricular Views on the Outdoors as a Potential Learning Environment

> *"Ja se on niin mahtava nähä, että se erilainen ympäristö kuin se niinkö innostaa niitä lapsia leikkiin ko se ei ole tämä meijän tavanomanen piha vaan sieltähän löytyy vaikka mitä tuolta mehtästä."*
> – Finnish teacher, Leena –
>
> *"And it's so awesome to see that a different environment inspires those kids to play when it's not our same old playground but there's something different out there in the woods."*

In the Finnish pre-school curriculum (FNBE, 2016, 31) learning environments refer: "To the facilities, locations, equipment, communities and practices which support children's growth, learning and interaction." In England, 'Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto' (DfES, 2006, 1) defined learning outside the classroom as: "The use of places other than the classroom for teaching and learning." Outdoor learning environments could be seen as significant as they connect the learner's direct experiences to learning and allow them therefore to: "Transfer learning experienced outside to the classroom and vice versa" (DfES, 2006, 1).

In England, the majority of Year 2 (Key Stage 1) lessons are held inside. There is very little research about the actual physical structure of Year 2 children's indoor classrooms. Typically, classrooms are equipped with a collection of child-sized tables, chairs and an interactive whiteboard. Most classes conduct daily 'carpet sessions', meaning children sitting on the floor in the front of the whiteboard. When utilising outdoor learning the teacher might take children: "Out into the playground occasionally as an enrichment activity directly related to the curricula"; e.g., a starter for the topic (Hawxwell et al., 2019, 323; Davies and Hamilton, 2018, 122). According to Hawxwell, et al. (2019, 323) the other end of the outdoor spectrum is especially arranged outdoor trips: animal zoo, exploration on local buildings, museums etc.

Substantial amounts and a wide range of research was carried out in the 1990's and 2000's on outdoor learning (Rickinson et al., 2004, 8). However, I argue that far too little attention has been paid directly to outdoor learning practices involving six-year-olds on a daily basis. Hawxwell, et al. (2019, 329) came to the same conclusion and concluded that the lack of research about outdoor learning

experiences among 0-5 and 5-11 years old, in itself, is a cause for concern. According to Rickinson, et al. (2004, 7) one of the possible reasons being…there are no long-term planned outdoor learning opportunities after Reception year, hence outdoor learning is considered in decline and under threat. Rickinson, et al. (2004, 56) claimed that: “There is a real need for more UK-based research into certain aspects of outdoor learning.”

In England, the majority of time spent in the outdoors happens at break and lunch times (Powell et al., 2016, 83) or during physical education in the playground. According to Ridgers, et al. (2010, 1), “Daily break time is mandatory and can account for up to 25% of the school day.” Nevertheless, The National Curriculum in England does offer freedom to teach outside (DfE, 2014a). It is even outlined in the core curriculum and it allows teachers to create inspired lessons (DfE, 2014a) and therefore choose the learning environment. Furthermore, “schools are free to choose how they organise their school day, as long as the content of the National Curriculum programmes of study is taught to all pupils” (DfE, 2014a). Whether this occurs is another matter. So far, however, there has been little research about how teachers actually employ the outdoor learning environment following the new National Curriculum in England in Year 2.

Rickinson, et al. (2004, 5) conducted a meta-analysis of 150 pieces of research on outdoor learning published in England between 1993 and 2003. The researchers examined outdoor learning with primary school pupils, secondary school students and undergraduate learners (Rickinson et al., 2004, 5). The study covered three main types of outdoor learning: fieldwork and outdoor visits, outdoor adventure education and school grounds/community projects (Rickinson et al., 2004, 5). The team came to the following conclusions regarding outdoor learning opportunity. Firstly, if the fieldwork and outdoor visits are: “Properly conceived, adequately planned, well taught and effectively followed up” …they will, “offer learners opportunities to develop their [children’s] knowledge and skills in ways that add value to their everyday experiences in the classroom” (Rickinson et al., 2004, 5). An especially positive impact can be seen on students: “Long-term memory due to the memorable nature of the fieldwork setting.” The fieldwork and outdoor experiences:

> "Can lead to individual growth and improvements in social skills…reinforcement between the affective and the cognitive…providing a bridge to higher order learning." (Rickinson et al., 2004, 5)

Secondly, the impact of outdoor adventure activities can impact positively on young people's attitudes, beliefs, self-perceptions, and interpersonal and social skills.

Similarly, a recent English study by Hawxwell, et al. (2019, 323–324) systematically reviewed a large data set of international academic journal articles (*n*=173), comprised of broad international research associated with Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC). Hawxwell, et al. (2019, 323) categorised a spectrum of eight different types of LotC-activities between *outdoor adventure* (58%) on the one end and *curriculum enrichment activities* (6%) as a playground enrichment activity outside the classroom on the other. Only 13% of journal articles focused upon children in the 5–11 age range (Hawxwell et al., 2019, 326). The researchers encouraged hands on collaboration with the teachers to avoid bias and the lack of practitioners' voices. Furthermore, they recommend that additional exploration should focus on: "How efficient LOtC might be in the facilitation of formal curriculum teaching and learning" (Hawxwell et al., 2019, 327). The focus needs to be: "On more upon empirically demonstrating the benefits." Otherwise, they observe, outdoor learning: "Becomes pigeonholed within the teaching population as a burdensome luxury" (Hawxwell et al., 2019, 328). The research concluded that outdoor learning should be an: "Intrinsic and vital part of a child's or young adult's school experience" (Hawxwell et al., 2019, 328). I would add my own wish to see considered outdoor learning as possibly enhancing children's connection and appreciation of nature itself, which could possibly be related to mental health.

Some teachers' lack of confidence in teaching outdoors might be seen an explanation for fewer outdoor learning opportunities being offered to children (Rickinson et al*.,* 2004, 6). Maynard and Waters (2007, 255) observed early years teachers' use of the outdoors in South Wales and found similar outcomes. "The teachers missed many of the opportunities afforded by the outdoor environment to

enhance children's learning." Instead of utilising the natural resources available to children, the teachers *replicated* "Similar pedagogical approaches whether working indoors or as part of 'normal' outdoor activity" (Maynard and Waters, 2007, 261). In 2006 DfES stated that:

> "Good quality learning outside the classroom…can lead to a deeper understanding of the concepts that span traditional subject boundaries and which are frequently difficult to teach effectively using classroom methods alone." (DfES, 2006, n/a)

However, in light of recent research by Davies and Hamilton (2018, 122) it appears that school curriculum requirements could act as a learning barrier for conducting everyday outdoor learning.

In Finnish pre-primary curriculum, the learning environment plays an important role in learning. Finnish pre-school physical environments resemble a home environment and provide plenty of play-based, indoor and outdoor activities (FNBE, 2016).

> "The preschool day in Finland follows daily structures by having morning and afternoon slots for group-based activities that can encourage children for movement (e.g., free play and outdoor time) or be still (e.g., teacher-led sessions and sitting-based circles)." (Määttä et al., 2019, 1)

The National Board of Education (FNBE, 2016) stipulates that:

> "The learning environment must be designed to guide the child's curiosity, interest, and motivation to learn, and to support the child's growth, learning, and self-assessment." (National Board of Education, 2016, 28)

Following the pre-primary curriculum, preschools offer stimulating physical environments for children's active play and the development of healthy lifestyles. Additionally, most of the preschools in Finland have access to natural environments (forest) and large outdoor play spaces. Furthermore, preschools commonly conduct trips to nearby areas that encourage physical activities (FNBE, 2016).

> “One of the key elements in the Finnish preschool weekly schedule is outdoor time, which is spent either in the preschool’s own yard or in conducting trips to nearby facilities that encourage physical activity.” (Määttä et al., 2019, 2).

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9-10.30	Morning Circuit Teaching sessions	Morning Circuit Teaching sessions	Exercise	Morning Circuit Teaching sessions	Morning Circuit Teaching sessions
10.30-11	Outdoor activities	Outdoor activities	Morning Circuit Teaching sessions	Outdoor activities	Outdoor activities
11-11.40	Eating	Eating	Eating	Eating	Eating
11.40-13	Reading session Games / games / outdoor activities	Reading session Games / games / outdoor activities	Reading session Games / games / outdoor activities	Reading session Games / games / outdoor activities	

Table 4: *Preschool Reading Order in Polvijärvi, Finland (2020)*

Outdoor activities are part of every Finnish preschool day and therefore children are advised to be equipped with regular outdoor clothing suitable for any weather (Peda.net, 2020). Preschoolers day includes plenty of time devoted for the outdoor activities. For example (Table 4), mainstream preschool reading order from the municipality of Polvijärvi, Finland.

The National Board of Education also takes into account the benefits of a healthy lifestyle as children become physically active whilst outdoors. FNBE (2016, 30) stipulates that children be: “Guided to avoid sitting for uninterrupted periods and to change their operational positions.” According to Määttä, et al. (2019, 2) preschool children tend to be less sedentary during outdoor time in preschools than indoors. In addition, a Norwegian qualitative study by Bjørgen (2016, 5) observed that children had higher physical activity levels during the preschool time in a natural environment than in the kindergarten’s outdoor play space.

Several studies (Bjørgen, 2016; 6, Herrington and Brussoni, 2015, 477; Park, and Riley, 2015, 23) have also highlighted that playing in natural outdoor environments has a pivotal role in promoting children's health and wellbeing. Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2015, n/a) recommendations that a child needs at least two hours of brisk physical activity every day. Outdoors not only increase children's physical activity levels but also positively affects their health, wellness, learning and development. The local Hyvinkää pre-school curriculum, based on the National Core Curricula (FNBE, 2016, 10), creates a unified learning framework for pre-school education in Hyvinkää (City of Hyvinkää, 2020). City's local pre-primary education curriculum stated that in the children's view, the nicest things about pre-primary education were playing, different forms of physical activity, trips to the forest, and crafts.

According to Havu-Nuutinen and Niikko (2014, 624)

> "A good preschool learning environment guides children's curiosity, interest and learning motivation; it promotes their own activity, self-direction and provides opportunities for play and other activities" (Havu-Nuutinen and Niikko, 2014, 624)

It could be concluded that 6-year-olds English and Finnish curricular views on the outdoors as a potential learning environment differs a great deal.

The following section will summarise the previously discussed topics.

3.6 A Comparative View into English and Finnish School Contexts

This concluding section focuses upon English and Finnish school contexts in an attempt to contrast different aspects of the six-year-old-child's education and its wider environment. This study set out to determine the different aspects of six-year-old-children's school readiness and current curricula and to reflect upon teachers' views of this phenomenon in both Finland and England. The literature review has raised important questions about the political reasons for regulating school starting age and young children's school readiness. Taken as a whole, this study highlights a concern that current, rigorous and systematic educational teaching methods might not automatically provide the desired learning outcomes for young learners. The literature review further suggests that, in general, young children's curricula be recognised in a broader sense than just possession of academic knowledge.

It is apparent that English and Finnish six-year-old-children's education systems differ significantly in their educational motivations and educational structures. These systems practise diverse academic standards culminating in different methods of assessing learning and enhancing children's development. Thus, what is expected from the six-year-old child academically differs significantly between England and Finland. Table 5, below, shows a comparison of school contexts in England and Finland.

Six-Year-Old Children's Educational Context		
	England	**Finland**
School starting age	5yrs.	7yrs.
Curriculum	subject based	play-based
Assessments	SAT	no official assessments
School uniform	yes	no
Length of school day/holidays	6h	4h
Teachers' education	B.A.	B.A./MA
Teacher/school inspections	Ofsted	no inspections
Average classroom size	27.1	13
Outdoor lessons	rarely	always

Table 5: *Comparison of School Contexts in England and Finland.*

School starting age: Children in Finland start their preschool at the age of six and formal school at the age of seven (Basic Education Act 628/1998). In England children start their full-time education following the child's 5th birthday (Education Act 1996, s.56, § 8(3)). However, most children begin Reception class in the September before they are 5, even as early as 4 years 1 month, and this has become increasingly formal.

Curriculum: The National Curriculum in England was reformed in 2013 and is based upon subjects and statutory requirements. Finnish pre-school curriculum was reformed in 2015. The objectives of pre-primary education being defined as follows: "For the child to learn and gain self-image through play and imagination in a supportive learning environment" (National Board of Education, 2016). There are no subjects in Finnish pre-school education, rather teaching is carried out as a whole, which is based on the children's interests (National Board of Education, 2016).

Assessments: In Finland, assessment evaluates the progress of the child's growth and learning process. The child's Pre-school Learning Plan (PLP) is filled in together with the guardians, the child his/herself and practitioners involved, and thus serves as a starting point after which evaluation, discussions and feedback are continuous between the teacher, the child and the caregiver. English assessment policy is based on National testing, called Nationally Standardised Summative Assessment (SAT). SAT evaluates pupils' knowledge and understanding of subject requirements.

School uniform: In Finland school uniforms are not required. In England, school uniform policy (DfE) requires children to wear school uniform.

Length of school day and holidays: Length of the school day in Finnish pre-primary school is four hours a day. Pre-primary education normally lasts for one year and it consists of a minimum of 700 hours a year (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019b). Summer holidays are 10–11 weeks between 1st of June to mid-August (Eurydice, 2019, 26). In England, local authority-maintained schools must

open for at least 380 sessions (190 days) during a school year (Long, 2019, 4). The length of the school day is approximately five or six hours per day. Summer holidays are six weeks between mid-July and first week of September (Eurydice, 2019, 63).

Teachers' education: The Finnish "teachers who work with six-year-old children in preschool have a preschool teacher qualification; that is to say, is a bachelor's degree (three years) from university, including a kindergarten teacher education degree" (Havu-Nuutinen and Niikko, 2014, 623). "As a rule, class teachers (MA) and qualified kindergarten teachers (BA) are the only ones entitled to provide pre-primary education" (Ministry of Education and Cultureb, 2019, n/a). According to Andere (2015, 3) "teachers in Finland are indeed of high quality because of the very strict process of selection into the preservice teaching programs."

Routes into pre-primary teaching in Finland are:

• A degree in early childhood education (Bachelor of Education) completed at a university.

It's not easy to summarise the diversity of English teachers' qualifications, however, teachers in English primary school are required to have a bachelor's degree. Many English teachers are now entering teaching with very limited views of educational theory. McGarr et al. (2017, 59) explored the theory-practice gap and concluded that teachers' ability to reflect critically on all sources of information would be desirable as emerging professionals.

Routes into primary school teaching in England are:

• Initial Teacher Education or Training (ITET) programme, such as a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree. However, the BEd has almost disappeared - the BA (education) is not a QTS in itself and doesn't include a practicum.

• A degree in a subject (maths, science, English) and then take a postgraduate teacher training programme, such as a PGCE or PGDE (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), 2020b).

• English qualifications fast track options involving a Batchelors' degree in a non-education subject followed by fast-track, mainly on-site training.

• Must have achieved minimum requirements in GCSE English, maths, and science.

The relative differences:

In England (UCAS, 2020b, n/a)

> “Teacher ensures children have good numeracy and literacy levels before going to secondary school. Teacher plans lessons and assess work based on standards set out in the curriculum. Communication skills and excellent literacy and numeracy skills are essential for this role.” (UCAS, 2020b, n/a)

In Finland the Educational Trade Union (OAJ, 2020) states:

> “The work of early childhood education and pre-primary education teachers requires a high level of theoretical training in childhood and child development and learning, as well as the early pedagogical expertise and solid methodological skills produced by the education. Key elements include expression, physical education and art education, as well as commitment and sensitivity in working with children of all ages, supporting and guiding children's participation and play. It is the task of the teacher of early childhood education and pre-school education to identify the child's strengths and also possible support needs, and to consider how the child can be supported in these with appropriate pedagogical solutions. The teacher supports, encourages, and encourages the child to experiment, practice, ask questions, doubt, and wonder.” (OAJ, 2020, n/a)

Teacher/school external inspections in England and Finland: In England, The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) carries out the educational inspections of maintained schools etc. (Ofsted, 2019b, 2). The framework and an inspection handbook dictate how inspectors will make each of the inspection judgements with the appropriate expertise and training (Ofsted, 2019, 3).

> “Inspection provides independent, external evaluation and identifies what needs to improve in order for provision to be good or better. It is based on gathering a range of evidence that is evaluated against an inspection framework and takes full account of our policies and relevant legislation in areas such as safeguarding, equality and diversity.” (Ofsted, 2019b, 4).

According to Sahlberg (2011, 5) Finland's unique education system does not carry out school inspection frameworks, standardised curricula, external standardised

testing, teacher effectiveness evaluations or emphasise “race-to-the-top mentality”. The image 2 illustrates nine European countries where teachers’ knowledge and skills are not defined in a national competence framework (EDUFI, 2018). Finnish teachers are very rarely evaluated externally. Usually evaluation takes place once a year with the headteacher, concentrating on future rather than past performance (EDUFI, 2018).

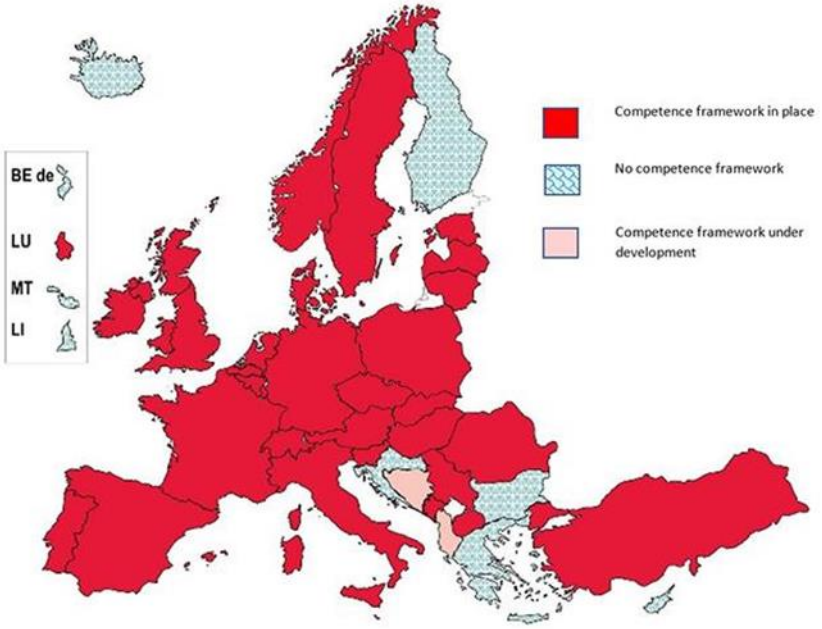


Figure 4: *Existence of Competence Frameworks. European Commission 2018. Teaching Careers in Europe (EDUFI, 2018)*

Average classroom size: Currently in England, Reception and Key Stage 1 classes, might only have a single schoolteacher accommodating a class of 30+, six-year-old children (DfE, 2014b, 23). According to the DfE: “The UK has one of the largest average primary school class sizes amongst the OECD countries” (DfE, 2011, 3). In June 2018 the average class size was 27.1 (DfE, 2018, 11). In December 2019 Labour party pledged to reduce class sizes as a general election promise (ITV Report, 2019, n/a). In comparison, when teaching a six-year-old pre-school group in Finland, the average classroom size is 13 children per teacher (Finnish National Board of Education, 2018). When evaluating pre-schoolers’ class sizes in the two countries being studied, and comparable attainment results, it is reasonable to question, how fittingly teachers can support young children’s

learning if the class size is extensive. Defries (2009, 3) reported that: “Teaching assistants (TA) are covering lessons for absent teachers in 80 per cent.” When a teacher is helped or covered by a teaching assistant with limited qualifications there may be implications for the children’s learning and development. In addition, Magnuson, et al. (2007a, 33) proposed that classroom size could influence pupil outcomes, especially when the aim is to close the gap between high and low achieving students.

Outdoor lessons: In England, the majority of Year 2 (Key Stage 1) lessons are held inside. In Finnish pre-school the outdoor learning environment plays an important role and classes are free to spend most of the day outside.

Chapter IV - Methodology

In this chapter I will discuss the interpretive approach, and the constructivist approach and how these were used in support of one another to enrich the data of this qualitative study.

The aim of the research was to explore teachers' perceptions about the current curricula and if, in their experience, it was supporting age-related practices. Therefore, a qualitative study approach was adopted incorporating short questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

After conducting the pilot study, and examining the ethics, I have explained the reasons for the methodology chosen including the specific data collection tools employed and the suitability of these to this study.

The following sections will describe in further detail the conceptual framework and design of the study It will also consider various advantages and disadvantages associated with the data collection tools employed.

4.1 Conceptual Framework and Study Design

The interpretive approach to qualitative research assumes that knowledge is constructed through social and cultural interpersonal interactions (Vygotsky, 1934/1978). "Interpretive approaches focus on subjective experience, small-scale interactions, and understanding" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, 15). According to King and Horrocks (2011, 11) qualitative approaches mainly originate from theoretical perspectives and are "rooted in interpretivism". Interpretivist research, in turn, could be described as examining, "Aspects of the social world by offering a detailed account of specific social settings, process or relationships" (King and Horrocks, 2011, 11).

Social constructivists assume that the participants (teachers) make sense of their experiences through the context they live in (school environment) (Hennink et al., 2011, 10). Knowledge of these experiences are then formulated through interaction with other individuals, that is to say other teaching personnel, and shared in a cultural context (Graue, 1992, 227). Through communication and reflection, teachers then create and construct their own particular perspectives, i.e. interpretations.

The objective of this study was to understand the teachers' opinions, beliefs and meanings concerning the chosen topic. It could be anticipated that the realities of the English and Finnish teachers would vary, and therefore, a social constructivism paradigm was applied to this research because:

> "Constructivist researchers perceive a [human being] …as a subjective, contextual, self-determining and dynamic being" (Greig et al., 2013, 65). Furthermore, "the constructivist researcher makes an effort to understand how the worlds…operate…and seek a contextualised holistic examination of participants' perspectives." (Greig et al., 2013, 65-66)

In the words of Greig, et al. (2013, 65-66), "The constructivist researcher makes an effort to understand how the worlds…operate…and seek a contextualised holistic examination of participants' perspectives."

According to King and Horrocks (2011, 12) an objective reality can be uncovered and proven to exist. It could thus be assumed that the selected teachers could possibly have diverse perceptions of this topic's phenomenon which, by employing the interpretivist perspective, I aimed to understand. Therefore, an interpretivist approach was employed as a part of my research philosophy and recognised as a naturalistic approach to choosing the data collection tools of semi-structured interviews and short questionnaires (King and Horrocks, 2011, 11).

Based on my prior knowledge, experience, and assumptions, I was specifically interested in examining the education of six-year-old children in England and Finland, and in discovering teacher perceptions in this context. I strove to listen to the voices of the teachers, and discover their perceptions of the subject matter,

this is because the teachers experience their own *school reality* and have formed their knowledge and perceptions based upon their experiences.

The interpretive approach allowed me to identify issues from the perspective of the study participants (Hennink et al., 2011; 9 King and Horrocks, 2011, 16), and permitted me to focus on understanding how teachers' experience curricula and how it guides their pedagogy. In accordance with this aim, the participants were asked a range of semi-structured interview questions. Examples of this type of questioning were: "How does the current National Curriculum support your pedagogy?", "What kind of limitations does it set? and "How does this make you feel?". I observed that these questions were the best method of obtaining the required information from the participants. Having developed the interview questions, these then helped me to formulate my conclusive research question.

My research was based on the idea of phenomenology, which propounds that important knowledge is gained through the understanding of others' experiences (McMillan and Wergin, 2006). Therefore, the research question was framed to the purpose of explanatory research. In this study the explanatory research is interested in explaining the relationship between the teachers' perceptions and the different components of the issue (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, 10). It was proposed that employing qualitative research would most effectively uncover teachers' diverse perspectives, their knowledge of, and their opinions on the chosen topic.

Qualitative research is used to accumulate data based on people's ideas, opinions, beliefs, motivations and attitudes towards various subject areas (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, 9). In this study, teachers' perceptions and opinions were explored relying on the responses of a small sample of the population. Given that the teachers' interview replies could be difficult to generalise, choosing these methods allowed significant data to merge and thus created substantial in-depth information (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, 7).

As presented earlier, semi-structured interviews (Appendix 7) were employed as the primary method. It was further concluded that the best tool to gather background information for this study, was the use of a supplementary approach

in the form of short questionnaires (Appendix 8). This method would unlock teachers' interpretations further when evaluating rich data within a qualitative study.

The basis for this decision was that qualitative research examines how teachers' make sense out of their experiences (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, 12). This particular method was adopted in order to examine different aspects of the research problem and because I was: "Researching questions about social experiences and lived realities" (Mason, 2006, 10), through the teachers' semi-structured interviews. Thus, backing up the participants' answers with short questionnaires would potentially increase the accuracy of my study.

> "Qualitative researchers are after meaning. The social meaning people attribute to their experiences, circumstances, and situations, as well as the meanings people embed into text and other objects, are the focus of qualitative research. Therefore...qualitative researchers try to extract meaning from their data." (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, 4)

For that reason, the chosen methodology should unlock the multi-dimensionality of lived experiences (Mason, 2006, 11); in this case the experiences of English and Finnish teachers who work at the schools and are involved in educating six-year-olds.

Using the chosen research tools, I have done this to explain:

> "As fully as possible the situational contours and contexts of social processes, and then making strategic and theoretically driven comparisons with similar processes in other contexts, or similar contexts where different processes occur, to generate explanations." (Mason, 2006, 16)

In conclusion, I have applied appropriate data collection tools which were therefore expected to provide a more reliable understanding of my research problem via a combination of different methods (Cohen et al., 2018, 32).

The next section will iterate the research outline, objectives and aims.

4.2 Research Outline, Objectives and Aims

In order to understand the participants' perspectives on six-year-old children's school readiness and current curricula demands on educational practises, the short questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were employed with English and Finnish teachers. Using methodological triangulation, I aimed to further understand the research problem (Mears, 2012, 170; King and Horrocks, 2011, 164).

My research data were gathered from multiple pre- and primary schools at various time points during the 2016–2017 academic year. In England the participants were recruited from 12 different schools. From Finland, a total of six preschools participated. The chosen 12 English schools were located in the North-East of England. All the schools were state schools: Six were Church of England schools, four maintained schools and two Academies. Academies in England are state-funded, receiving their funding directly from the government, and they are non-fee-paying schools. Academies are also independent of local authorities (LA) and therefore differ from the maintained schools which receive their funding through local authorities (UK Parliament: House of Commons Library, 2019). The schools were located in medium sized towns (approx. 85.000) and small villages (approx. 500 - 5000).

In Finland, four of the pre-schools were situated in a big town (approx. 200,000) and two in a small town (approx. 15,000). All Finnish pre-schools were located in a middle-class neighbourhood. In Finland, 75% of adults lived in a middle-income household in 2010. According to the OECD, (2018), in Finland income is more evenly distributed. However, in recent years the gap has increased between the rich and the middle-class (OECD, 2018, 1). The wider gap between lower- and upper-income households possibly affects some children's academic achievement.

The data collection employed two approaches; these are discussed in turn. *The first part* describes teachers as participants and the data collection process via a

short questionnaire and then *the second part* employs the data collection process via semi-structured interviews.

Criteria for selecting suitable participants were as follows: pre- and primary school teachers as they practice within the school culture. The semi-structured interview approach allows teachers to describe the issue in depth. Small cross-national samples were chosen because of the expected difficulties of obtaining access to primary schools and the burden of the financial investments.

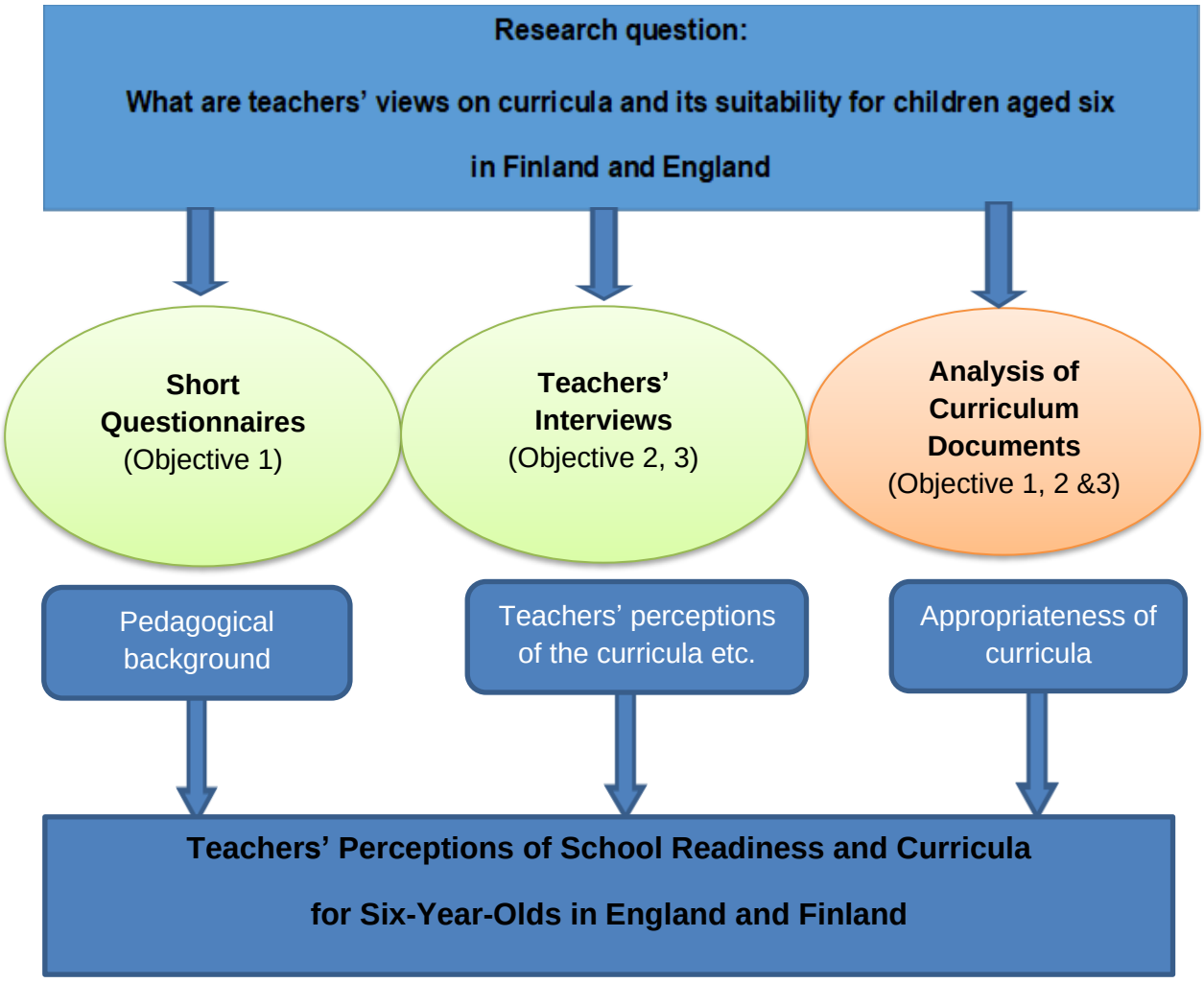


Figure 5: *The Methodological Framework Applied in this Study*

The purpose of this study is to investigate the following research objectives:

1. To collect background information of teachers with *a short questionnaire.*

2.To determine and contrast pre- primary and primary school teachers' perceptions on children's school readiness, the current curriculum and practised pedagogy through administration *of a semi-structured interview.*

3. To synthesise findings from both countries in order to comment on what are the teachers' perceptions of the current curriculum, and whether they perceive the curricula and the educational practices as supporting the six-year-old children's education (Year 2 in England / Pre-school in Finland)

This study drew on the methodological framework highlighted in Figure 5, in order to respond to the research objectives. Therefore, a research question was determined to find out: *What are teachers' views on six-year-old children's education and its suitability for children aged six in England and Finland.*

The next section will discuss the ethical issues in my research in detail, how I obtained the informed consent form, and analyse the process of access to the research data.

4.3 Research Ethics, Informed Consent Form and Access to Research Data

In this section I will describe the research ethics pertaining to teacher, the process for obtaining the informed consent form and how access to the schools was obtained.

Social research could be viewed as an activity, involving some form of intrusion into the lives of those studied (Bechhofer and Paterson, 2000, 13). Some participants can also experience: "Distress and embarrassment during the research" (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, 24). Therefore, research ethics are designed to protect the study participants, the researchers and their institutions,

all of whom are involved in the research (Cohen et al., 2018, 115; Flick, 2014, 49; Alderson and Morrow, 2011, 3). The first international guideline on ethical research was the Nuremberg Code (1947), which stated that: “The voluntary consent of the human subject was absolutely essential” (Nuremberg Code, 1947, n/a). Subsequently, basic ethical principles were created by The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research in 1974, and by the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) in America (OHRP, 2018). The National Commission recommended that The Belmont Report be adopted in its entirety, instead of specific recommendations (OHRP, 2018). The Belmont Report (1979), in turn, consists of three main ethical core principles and guidelines: beneficence, justice and respect for persons, when the research involves human subjects (Hennink et al., 2011, 63). The Belmont Report also considered: “The nature and definition of informed consent in various research settings” (OHRP, 2018). The ethical codes of practice ensure that suitable informed consent procedures are used and that research: “Abides by legal requirements and does not violate ethical principles” (Cohen et al., 2018, 115).

The University of Lincoln Research Ethics Committee ensured the ethical standards by examining my research design and methods before I engaged with the actual data collection (Appendix 9). Consequently, this study involved several gatekeepers. Gatekeepers play an important role as they create: “A positive, protective function, sheltering participants… from potential harm and testing the motives of those who want access” (Masson, 2006, 233).

Therefore, the first permission was sought from the University of Lincoln, Ethics Committee, via an Ethical Approval Form (EA2). The form was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, and The School of Education Research Committee granted ethical approval for this research 25/01/2016.

In England, the second gatekeepers’ permission were sought from the primary schools’ headteachers. I employed two different approaches to gain access to the schools.

The first approach was to directly call the school. This sometimes took several attempts before succeeding. Usually the school’s receptionist picked the message

up and I was assured that the message would be passed onto the head. In some cases, I was also asked to e-mail the school my research as attachments in advance, e.g. ethical approval, before the school committed to my research. I found this method challenging, it was frustrating and less successful as this extract from my note keepings demonstrates:

> *"Called 4.3.2016, the Reception took my mob. number (no reply). Called 8/6/16 13.12p.m. (head teacher not available, with someone) and they asked to call again 3.25p.m. (head in meeting), call back 5p.m. (no answer). Called Tue. 9/6/16 and I gave my home number, so the head can call back. Called again 10/6/16 and e-mailed information again. Called several times, never got through to the head."* (My personal research diary, 2016)

The second approach was to ask the school's headteacher directly. Generally, this face-to-face conversation was successful, but then again, not on every occasion as my personal diary indicates:

> *"I e-mailed 25/2/16, after face-to-face meeting with the headteacher… but no answer back (meanwhile in Finland)…Called back to school Wed. 8/6/16. Reception took my contact number: Headteacher will call back. In conference, will be back on Monday 8.30a.m., 20/6/16. I was advised to call back then. Called Tues. 21/6/16, head with Yr1 parents, maybe call Wed. 22/6/16? Reception took my number just in case. Called 22/6/16 a.m. Head with Reception parents advised to call again around lunch time. Head leaving the school, called 24/6/16. Deputy head will call me back… Talked with the DH. She indicated that they are interested in taking part. E-mailed Deputy head all the information…again 29/6/16 and I called 4/7/16 (DH at assembly), I will call again. Called later: called 3 times, Deputy will e-mail back… did not contact." (My personal research diary, 2016)*

Consequently, working as a part time supply teacher in nearby primary schools offered me therefore, a better opportunity to sample the actual schools more purposefully. Furthermore, as I had worked in some of the schools previously, over a ten-year period, this helped me to establish trust and made it easier to access the permissions required for this research in England to take place.

To create successful data collection, whilst I was supply teaching, I asked the Year 2 teacher directly, if he or she would be interested in taking part in my research. This was because the teachers were the ones who ultimately were

affected by the interview process, and they had to arrange the time and place in their busy working schedule. Usually after that, I just asked if the headteacher had time for a short discussion with me, so I could explain my desire to recruit participants from their school. When my research topic was discussed with the teaching personnel, it was discovered to be of interest to all involved and therefore the interview agreements and permissions were easier to achieve. In most cases I was granted unconditional permission, with the caveat that I e-mailed my ethical approval form, informed consent letter for teachers (Appendices 9 and 10), the semi-structured interview questions and the Disclosure and Barring Service (CRB) certificate. After an e-mail I arranged a suitable time for the initial visit with the teacher in their school.

In Finland, permission was first sought by sending an e-mail to the chosen city's *Early Childhood Education and Training* department to discover the contact person. The contact person was needed in order that he or she would be able to grant the required research permit. The study permit was conditional until the applicant had been in contact with the appropriate department that the study related to. The implementation of the study was then finally agreed upon with the department's contact person. City A's research permit-form was completed electronically, and the application had to be accompanied by a research plan approved for the pilot study, the university's ethical approval and CRB. After submitting the form and attachments, an acknowledgment of the receipt of the approval form arrived via e-mail from the coordinator of pedagogical support. The completed Ethics Committee Approval Form was obtained from City A on 20/01/16. The Coordinator of Pedagogical Support e-mailed my request to the possible volunteering preschools on my behalf. The participating Finnish preschool settings contacted me directly via e-mail. I also e-mailed the interview questions and the informed consent form to the contact person before the actual visit. After receiving the e-mail from the volunteering preschools, I was consequently able to arrange the times for the first visit. After the first visit, the second date was agreed upon directly with the kindergarten teachers themselves.

A similar ethical process was needed to gain permission from City B in Finland. However, the process was easier, and the permission was granted by the Child Care Agency and the form was signed by two people: The Early Childhood

Education Director and the Education Director. The Ethics Committee Approval Form was gained from City B on 16/03/16. Similarly, The Early Childhood Education Director e-mailed on my behalf City B's preschools in search of volunteering settings for the research. The consenting preschool contacted me directly via e-mail and thereafter I was able to arrange by phone a suitable first visit. Despite the difficulties and protocols, I was able to accomplish all stages ethically, timely and appropriately.

The following will describe the research ethics procedures related the teachers in this study.

4.3.1 Research Ethics – Working with Teachers

I considered teachers to be competent adults who were able to decide themselves if they wanted to volunteer for my research. The teachers were adequately informed about protocols on the first school visit and later reminded of their rights via research information letter before making their final decision (Bell and Waters, 2014, 178) (Appendix 10). According to Flynn and Goldsmith: (2013, 10), "The term informed consent implies that subjects know and understand the risks and benefits of participation in the research."

I ensured through the informed consent form that the teachers' participation was completely voluntary, and that all information was treated with the strictest confidentiality including the participants' anonymity. I committed to changing the names and places in this research by removing any identifying information, e.g. names of the schools and any personal details. According to Groundwater-Smith, et al. (2015, 50) "…promoting confidentiality in research is to mask the identity of participants and the locations of the research by using pseudonyms."

The consent form stated that the collected data would be stored on a password-protected computer, the password known only by myself, and that the computer would be kept in locked premises. It was also stated clearly that the data is to be stored appropriately (handling and storage time [> 8 years]) and after that time

period deleted. However, the participants were aware that the information about the project, including interview data, would be shared with my PhD supervisor and other appropriate staff at the University of Lincoln.

The informed consent form affirmed that the participant (teacher) had a right to withhold information. This included the rights of the participant to be able to withdraw, stop or leave at any time they want to, or have a break during the interview process. The British Sociological Association (BSA) stated that I...

> "...have a responsibility to ensure that the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by the research." (BSA, 2017, 5)

Furthermore, I ensured that if a participant decided to withdraw from the research it would be done without fear of being penalised. In this case the teacher needed to handle the withdrawals through e-mailing the researcher. Even after the interview was completed, I ensured them that they have the right to withdraw from the project at any time by e-mailing me until the clearly stated cut-off date. The deadline date was stated in the informed consent form, which was three months after the interviews initially took place.

The data from teachers were collected through the short questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The primary location for this data collection was the teachers' workplace: pre/schools. According to Hennink, et al. (2011, 9) the results of qualitative research are better validated when conducted in the participant's actual settings and therefore, all the interviews took place in the schools after the pre/school day. It was proposed that a familiar setting would also help the participants feel comfortable.

Prior to the interview the researcher recapped and reminded the participant of their rights to confidentiality and anonymity. The pseudonyms provided also helped to ensure teachers' privacy and anonymity during the presentation of the findings. I also informed the participants of their right to withdraw, stop or leave at any time if she wanted to, or have a break during the interview process including the option of omitting answers or questions. I also ensured that I myself did not guide the participants in their responses. According to Hennink et al. (2011, 128) it

is important that the interviewer keeps themselves out of the interview and consequently prevent their opinions from influencing the answers.

According to Hennink et al. (2011, 63-64) ethical responsibilities may be more challenging in qualitative research because the researcher is in search of peoples' perceptions, beliefs and feelings. To find these *true voices* might require a close relationship between the researcher and the participant (Hennink et al., 2011, 64). Therefore, building relations of trust with the participants could be seen as of paramount importance. In this case I found building working relations with the participants relatively easy and straightforward. Alderson and Morrow (2011, 6) indicated that this might be because the researcher is seen as independent, fair, open-minded and careful about confidentiality. It is also proposed that, since I was a familiar face via my supply teacher role that helped the teachers to feel more comfortable with me. Being seen by the teaching personnel as a familiar face in the school helped me to create confidence, rapport and good working relations with the teachers (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, 5).

In Finland the working process may have been facilitated by the fact that researcher and participants shared a common native language, and participants were aware of the fact that I was working under limited time and expense conditions, which fact also highlighted my personal commitment and belief in the importance of the research.

Reflecting on my research design and intent, I believe there were not any particular risks or dilemmas involved as a result of the data collection. I have also ensured confidentiality and anonymity during the presentation of findings.

Consent forms were used with the teachers, including the pilot study. The form contained information about how I am going to collect the data, the participant's rights to withhold information without fear of being penalised etc. (Appendix 10). The principle of justice was acknowledged by the researcher and the notion that I would treat all participants as fairly as possible. Furthermore, the researcher ensured that she was not guiding the participants during the interview session.

The researcher also ensured the participants' well-being during the questionnaire/interview process (beneficence) e.g. interviewees were able to have a break or stop/leave if they wished.

The teachers were informed that they would be responsible for withdrawals if they decided not to take part later (after the research took place). Withdrawals were achievable through e-mailing the researcher. The researcher concluded that as the research was conducted in two different countries e-mailing was the easiest, most efficient and most affordable means available. However, no participants asked to withdraw an interview from the study.

The next section explains how the pilot study was conducted and how I came to choose my data collection approaches. My objective was to clarify the weaknesses in the methodology and its tools and improve these after the pilot study was conducted.

4.4 Pilot Study

In order to ensure that my research methods were appropriate for my topic and participants I elected to undertake a pilot study. In this way, I secured an understanding of whether or not the chosen research methods would work, in my study. Thomas (2013, 173) explained that: "A pilot study means to conduct a much smaller study to prepare for a larger one". According to Bell and Waters (2014, 167):

> "The purpose of a pilot exercise is to get the bugs out of the instrument so that respondents in...[the] main study will experience no difficulties in completing it." (Bell and Waters, 2014, 167)

Therefore, the main aim with piloting, was to try out the chosen data collection techniques, make informed decisions about the types of questions, and to clarify the weaknesses associated with the chosen approaches (Gibson and Brown, 2009, 55).

My research involved travelling, which can be financially costly, and therefore it was imperative to plan and pilot everything well in advance. I needed to contact the councils and obtain schoolteachers' responses, in addition to organising mutually agreed dates and times for the interviews. A pilot study was conducted in one English primary school and involved three Year 2 classroom primary school teachers. The pilot took place in February/March 2016 in North-East England only, due to financial restrictions and the limited time frame.

After signing the informed consent form, the teacher was asked to fill in the short questionnaire. This part of the pilot gave me an estimate of how long it takes the recipients to complete the form (Bell and Waters, 2014, 167). Knowing the timing (which took approximately ten minutes), enabled me to organise my planning beforehand and inform the subsequent participants about their scheduling, when collecting the rest of the data. The pilot also helped me to outline a preliminary analysis as to whether the wording of the questions caused any obscurities (Bell and Waters, 2014, 167). I was able to determine the answers to these questions immediately after piloting, as I was present for the duration of the questionnaire.

After the pilot I added one extra question to *the short questionnaire* (question 9, Appendix 8). The added question was proposed to improve triangulation when compared with the classroom sizes (how many students) and staffing. This was considered particularly important as it has been suggested, for example, that the classroom size could influence children's school readiness outcomes, behaviour and the achievement gap between high and low achieving students (DfE, 2011, 2; Magnuson et al., 2007a, 33).

Before starting the next pilot study, with the semi-structured interviews, I asked the participants for comment or if they had any questions about my study. The teachers had already been informed about the nature of the study beforehand via research information letter and initial visit. However, I was aware that they still might have questions, or they might want to withdraw from the study. As a researcher I felt I had a responsibility to explain, as fully as possible, the process again if required (Bell and Waters, 2014, 179). After signed confirmation, I went ahead and piloted the semi-structured interviews. According to Bell and Waters

(2014, 179) the practice of informing is important as it also protects the interviewee from accusations of possibly coercing participants into participating.

The interview data was recorded on a digital audio recorder. After the pilot study the researcher was able to re-evaluate the research design and refine the approach used e.g., the wording of the questions. *Teachers' semi-structured interview* questions were refined and clarified, including question 7. The researcher added the word week into question 7 (Appendix 7). This was aimed to make the questions clearer for the participants. Bell and Waters (2014, 179) imply that:

> "Although question wording is important, it is not quite as important to be precise about the use of certain terms"...more important is "the manner in which you ask questions." (Bell and Waters, 2014, 179)

Justifying the chosen method for semi-structured interviews with the teachers, I favoured open ended questions for several reasons: firstly, as English is my second language this method of interview would give me an opportunity to clarify my questions, clarify the interview answers and overall increase the transparency required throughout the interview process. Secondly, because I had only a limited time to travel to Finland and conduct my interviews, everything had to be done appropriately. As my interviews were planned and agreed upon ahead of the time of data collection, I was able to achieve a sufficient response rate and therefore reach the saturation point (Mears, 2012, 171). Another justification for the semi-structured interviews was that I was able to record the respondents' own words. This helped me later to decide what to change if needed.

After the pilot study, I was able to recognise the challenges and make the necessary minor changes, which now better supported my study's moving forward. The pilot study interviews were included within the final data because there were no major changes and the questions stayed consistent.

4.4.1 Teachers' Sampling Section

The English participants consisted of 17 Year 2 teachers, from 12 primary schools including the three pilot-study teachers. All of them worked in state schools. According to the Ofsted's four-point scale of grading, the selected English schools were good or outstanding (Ofsted, 2018b, 39). In Finland, schools are not ranked. All the recruited pre-schools were run by the city or municipality and they were classed as typical settings for six-year-olds. The participants from Finland consisted of 20 preschool teachers, from six state-funded pre-schools. All participating teachers were females (England, 100% – Finland, 100%).

Teachers' questionnaires and semi-structured interviews took place in Southern and Western Finland April – May 2016; and Northeast England June – July 2016-2017. My reasons for picking these locations were primarily physical and due to limited financial assets. The participants were pre- and primary school teachers who were recruited using a convenience sampling method (Flick, 2014), e.g. selecting the participants who are readily available and can best inform the research questions to enhance the study.

4.5 Data Collection Process - Short Questionnaires

Short questionnaires and the interview questions were given to the attendees *before* the actual interview session during the first school visit. I had also e-mailed these two data collection forms to the headteacher before the research took place. During the first school visit, I brought copies of the questionnaires and the interview questions with me to give out. In this way the teachers had time to fill in the questionnaire before the actual interview if they wished. I also carried extra questionnaires with me when conducting the interview (the second visit). This practise proved useful as some questionnaires were forgotten, left at home or misplaced by teachers.

The short questionnaires functioned as a tool to provide background data and context and to give sociocultural positioning and context to my qualitative data.

The short questionnaires were also used for describing the chosen population (teachers) and to establish general patterns across the different contexts (England and Finland). The form sought to keep questions brief and direct so that they were easily understood by the participants (Tymms, 2012, 234). Generally, when utilising questionnaires via internet and e-mail, there is no control over who fills it out, or if the response rate will be high enough (Bernard, 2013, 222). Collecting the questionnaires personally gave the teachers and the researcher, the opportunity to ask clarifying questions if needed. If the teacher had not yet filled the form, she was provided the opportunity to do so whilst I was preparing for the interview.

There were four closed-ended questions as tick-boxes. The remaining six questions asked the participants to write answers of just one or at most a few words. The questionnaires were collected from the teachers prior to the semi-structured interview. The aim of the questionnaires was to generate the background information for the study as stated earlier, e.g. a breakdown of the classroom size. This question might reveal whether teachers consider they are able to apply their pedagogy depending on the size of the class. The short questionnaires were also expected to show the common trends between the participants and countries' education systems and how these related to the main semi-structured interview data. For example, whether teachers' knowledge / education of the child development theories affect their pedagogy. Or whether teachers' work experience is related to how they understand play-based opportunities. The questionnaire operated on different dimensions of variables, e.g. the highest qualification and teachers' experience of teaching by years. The questionnaire could also show similarities and differences between the participants' understandings on school readiness related to working years and whether younger / older teachers feel differently when implementing curricula and pedagogy.

To ensure the privacy of the participants, the names below are pseudonyms (Table 6, 7).

Participants – England

School	Teacher	Highest Qualification	Years of Teaching Experience
Primary school 1	Allison	BA (Hons), QTS	1-2
Primary school 2	Beth	B.Ed. (Hons)	over 10
Primary school 3	Claire	B.Ed. (Hons)	over 10
	Diana	BA (Hons)	over 10
	Emma	PGCE Primary	6-10
	Fiona	BA (Hons) Primary Education	1-2
Primary school 4	Grace	PGCE Primary	3-5
Primary school 5	Helen	BA (Hons)	over 10
Primary school 6	Irene	B.Ed. (Hons)	over 10
Primary school 7	Julia	Master's Degree	over 10
	Kelly	PGCE Primary	1-2
	Lea	B.Ed.	over 10
Primary school 8	Melissa	PGCE Primary	1-2
Primary school 9	Nicole	BA (Hons)	1-2
Primary school 10	Olivia	PGCE Primary	over 10
Primary school 11	Penny	Master's degree	6-10
Primary school 12	Ruth	BA	3-5

Table 6: *Pseudonyms of Teachers in England by Gender, Highest Qualification and Years of Teaching*

Participants - Finland

School	Teacher	Highest Qualification	Years of Teaching Experience
Pre-Primary school 1	Auli	BA	1-2
	Birgitta	BA	6-10
Pre-Primary school 2	Carita	BA (Hons)	over 10
	Elisa	BA (Hons)	over 10
	Heidi	BA	1-2
Pre-Primary school 3	Iida	BA	over 10
	Jaana	BA (Hons)	over 10
	Katri	BA	over 10
	Leena	BA	over 10
Pre-Primary school 4	Minna	BA	over 10
	Noora	BA	6-10
	Oona	BA	6-10
	Pauliina	BA (Hons)	over 10
Pre-Primary school 5	Riitta	BA (Hons)	1-2
	Senja	Master's degree	1-2
	Taina	BA	over 10
Pre-Primary school 6	Ursula	BA (Hons)	over 10
	Ulla	Master's degree	3-5
	Veera	BA	6-10
	Venla	Master's degree	1-2

Table 7: *Pseudonyms of Pre-School Teachers in Finland by Gender, Highest Qualification and Years of Teaching*

These questions were designed to measure, support and triangulate the research question further; that is to clarify whether the teaching experience is related to curriculum knowledge and applied pedagogy, and how this may impact on teachers' pedagogy / attitudes. Ultimately the responses related to the research question. A common weakness of the questionnaires can be that the participants may read or think differently into each question and therefore reply based on their own interpretation of the question (Flick, 2014). However, most of the teachers did not complete the questionnaire beforehand. This gave me a chance to assist the teacher with the questions (if needed) but also check if the form (filled beforehand) was filled in accordingly when returned. Applying face-to-face administration of questionnaires was powerful as the response rate was 100%.

4.6 Data Collection Process – Semi-Structured Interview Questions and Analysis Overview

My study was a qualitative cross-national comparative project which focused on pre/primary school teachers educational experiences in England and Finland. According to Hantrais (2009, viii) international comparative research interest has grown in research projects, especially within the European Union. Defining international comparative research can be challenging:

> "…'comparative research' is the term widely employed to describe studies of societies, countries, cultures, systems, institutions, social structures and change over time and space, when they are carried out with the intention of using the same research tools to compare systematically the manifestations of phenomena in more than one temporal or spatial sociocultural setting." (Hantrais, 2009, 2)

I do recognise that the collected data reflects only specific regions in each country and possibly other factors were pertinent (e.g. geographical locations, poverty, socioeconomic or political aspects). How these factors and their impact were taken into account when designing the research will be considered in discussions of the data and its subsequent analysis. However, the final conclusions are based on the small-scale study and will not necessarily present the whole truth.

Interviews were considered a suitable method for gaining qualitative information about people's experiences, views and feelings. According to Thomas (2013, 194) "An interview can be thought of as a discussion between a researcher and somebody from whom you wish to get information." Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews were chosen because:

> "The interviewed subject's viewpoints are more likely to be expressed in an openly designed interview situation than in a standardized interview or a questionnaire." (Flick, 2014, 207)

The interview questions, in this research, were developed and related to relevant literature, my own experiences and discussions with the teaching staff. In addition, the questions were reviewed after the pilot study outcomes.

As stated earlier, the pre- and primary schoolteachers have direct experience with the researched phenomena. However, when conducting interviews, one needs to be aware of some of the limitations. For example, Hennink, et al. (2011, 124) emphasised the importance of good social skills in the process of interviewing, and consequently the ability to establish a trustworthy rapport. When conducting interviews in another country this data collection method can expose an even bigger limitation because of divergent cultural norms and language between the interviewer and the interviewee (Hennink et al., 2011, 124).

Interestingly Breakwell (1990, 80) stated: "The interview approach relies heavily upon respondents being able and willing to give accurate information." For example, audio recording interviews might inhibit responses because of the permanent nature of the record (Langdridge, 2004, 49).

The questions were intended to be sufficiently open so as not to presume either concerns or anticipation, although it must be acknowledged that when asking for attitudes, beliefs and feelings this can produce unstable and variable evidence (Langdridge, 2004, 50). Generally, semi-structured interview questions consist of pre-set questions which, therefore, could cause some inflexibility. Moreover, the researcher cannot be entirely sure where teachers' answers will lead or if they point to other areas to be explored (Mears, 2012, 172). However, rephrasing the question or asking the question again helped me to build a rapport and aid

comprehension. I noticed that the interviews were challenging as they require considerable time and energy, including transcribing afterwards (Mears, 2012, 173).

After agreement upon school visit days, I made sure I arrived at each school a few minutes earlier in order to get checked in. Usually, I met with the teacher in her classroom. On some occasions, I was also assisted by other school staff who sometimes directed me to the designated interview or staff room. The interview rooms were selected by school staff and most of the rooms were generally used for intervention or small group activities.

The interview session started with me thanking the teacher for taking part in the research. Secondly, I enquired whether the participant had had time to read the research information letter given during the first session. As expected, most of the teachers were familiar with the content of the research information letter and they were able to return the signed permission before the interview. This procedure ensured that accurate information was received on every occasion (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, 85).

Furthermore, in the beginning of every interview session, I assessed potential risks and discomfort for participants. There were no identifiable physical risks involved as the interviews happened in the school. In every instance I reminded the teacher of her ethical rights, in this instance withdrawal, and then asked them to sign the informed consent form if not done beforehand. The answers were collected from pre/primary teachers using semi-structured open-ended questions (Appendix 7). The conversations were conducted face-to-face and audio taped. I felt that it was important to let my participants know the purpose of my study in my own words including how much I appreciated their time and valuable information they were about to share. I also mentioned that I personally would not be speaking much but rather listen to their views and – at times – nod my head. This was understood and worked very well – perhaps specifically because of the participants profession who are used to talking to a listening audience.

I decided to transcribe interviews word for word (verbatim) (Langdridge, 2004, 263). This method helped me to get started with the analysis itself and improved my ability to become familiar with my data. However, it could be argued that what

is said (verbal content) by the interviewee is not sufficient, that a verbatim transcript is not detailed enough since it misses prosodic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic information (Langdridge, 2004, 264). In this study, it was decided, that the chosen transcription system was considered fit for the purpose.

Table 8 below shows the durations shortest, longest and arithmetic mean - of the interviews between teachers in each country. Times were remarkably similar.

The durations of the interviews	**English Teachers** (N=17)	**Finnish Teachers** (N=20)
Shortest	16min. (pilot)	19min.
Longest	1h 3min.	1h 2min.
Arithmetic mean of the total length of the interviews	32min.	35min.

Table 8: *The Durations of the Interviews between English and Finnish Teachers in Each Country*

The interviews and the questionnaires were designed to complement each other and therefore, to produce *stronger data and validity* (Flick, 2014). And as a result, this enabled the researcher to triangulate the findings further.

In this study, *thematic analysis* was used to analyse the semi-structured interviews (Appendix 11). The goal of the researcher was to find the common patterns in the full collected data set and what can be identified as “themes”, including the analysis of how they might differ (King and Horrocks, 2011, 149-150). Data analysis was undertaken using a bottom-up approach (data driven) identifying arising themes and linking these to address the research question. According to Thomas and Harden (2008, 1) thematic analysis is carried out in three stages. Firstly, the coding of text “line-by-line”, secondly, the development of “descriptive themes”; and thirdly, the generation of “analytical themes” (Thomas and Harden, 2008, 1).

The semi-structured interviews were annotated and read through several times to show which aim/objective each question was relevant to and how this responded to the overarching research question (Appendix 12). The process will be

described further in steps, including practiced examples as Appendices 11 and 11.

The first step was descriptive coding. This was accomplished when I read through my annotated interview transcripts. I decided to underline relevant material with colour highlighters and by this method arranged the data into categories and subcategories (Appendix 12). This helped me discern the significant themes and emerging topics. One of the reasons I chose this method, was that the interviewees often used dialect, especially in Finland, which would have been difficult to trace with qualitative analysis software e.g. NVivo. I also found it easier to add brief comments and define descriptive codes at the same time on my printed A4 manuscripts. This method was repeated for each transcript and I was able to refine the descriptive codes. This process was slow but kept me familiar with the data, as I was able to deal thoroughly and in an orderly manner with any given question at a time (Langdridge, 2004, 263).

The second step was to apply interpretive coding and cluster descriptive codes. At this point, I also began interpreting the meaning of the clusters in relation to my research questions and the main disciplinary position (Appendix 12). Therefore, I applied interpretive codes to the full data set. I achieved this by copying, pasting and sorting the chosen sentences on my study and then later began to rearrange them into relevant topics and themes [Word Document-file].

The third step was to detect the overarching themes of my research. I arrived at the key themes for the data sets as a whole and interpolated the interpretive themes from the theoretical and practical stances of my research. ***Finally,*** the analysed data was synthesised to arrive at conclusions and construct tables to present the results between England and Finland (Appendix 13).

4.6.1 Avoiding Bias and Self Reflexivity

According to Mears (2012) semi-structured interviews are predicted to produce a deep understanding of the studied phenomenon. The aim was to investigate the disparities in teachers' perceptions related to six-year-olds' curricula. No doubt I have a keen interest in the chosen topic – otherwise, I would not have selected it. Therefore, undertaking this research project has been rather personal and connects to my identity as a primary school teacher. The roots of my educational background lie in the early years and child development. At the moment, the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) gives me the opportunity to work as a supply teacher in various nurseries, special education, referral units, and primary school settings. This has a significant impact on my teaching, learning, and reflexivity as I am able to develop my own professionalism when working under the practical side of the discipline including the engagement with current issues in the field. Overall, I believe I have a broad knowledge and understanding of education, including teaching which has provided me with a strong pedagogical background and knowledge on how, I reason, the child should be educated.

According to Davies (2012, 774), "social scientists have emotions about the subjects they study". Some parts of this rationale refer to my personal experience and therefore, I will use *I*. Quoting Schutz (2014, 3), "Teaching, like other caring professions, involves considerable emotional investment. This suggests that teachers' emotions may be a useful portal for inquires aimed at understanding the problems of them."

When moving to England in 2006, I was amazed at just how much was expected from a young child academically. My daughter, aged six, joined the school in a year two class without any preparation or possibility to postpone her attendance and start from year one. As a mother, my general feeling was that hers and other children's childhoods were *stolen* by the formal education system (Tyre et al., 2006).

Over thirty years of personal work-based observation in both England and Finland have led me to conclude that curricular targets and their associated teaching practices may not always be those best suited to the needs of the youngest

learners. Children's unwanted behaviour, their overall frustration towards schoolwork and sometimes a lack of a deeper understanding indicates the missing relations within the curriculum or/and pedagogy. Undeniably there can be various reasons for the educational misconnections (e.g. family's socio-economic status, parent's mental health, poverty) however, as I come to the end of my writing process, I am aware that there might be more suitable pedagogical ways of engaging children with their learning.

Because of my perspectives on the topic, there are potential factors suggesting bias in this study. To be aware of "the bias trap" (Bell and Waters, 2014, 187) I have critically interpreted produced data with the support of and suggested feedback from my supervisors.

I am also aware that conducting these interviews on my own can also create bias. A team of interviewers would have been ideal but not realistic for an individual writing her PhD. To reduce bias, I endeavoured to conduct myself in an open-minded and empathic way including reflexivity during the interview. I believe that the interviewees were able to identify with me as well because I am also a teacher and maybe experiencing similar phenomena.

Furthermore, I would have preferred someone else carrying out the second coding to minimise bias. This however was not feasible due to financial restrictions. Possible bias, in this case, is therefore unwitting and I do not benefit from any falsehood. As stated earlier, to ensure that potential bias was reduced, I have reacted to my supervisors' criticisms and thus engaged in reflexivity during the coding and analysing period. According to Bell and Waters (2014, 186), the interviewer may also be influenced by interviewees and this could lead to bias. To avoid this happening, I have included direct quotations from the participants.

The final data analysis includes relevant practical perspectives, governments' policy, notes to the research literature review and my own professional practice knowledge (Burton et al., 2014, 202). The analysed findings are expected to show the relationships and address the specific differences of educational curricula and practices between these two countries (Appendix 12).

This study will, therefore, open up teachers' personal experiences for discussion, giving them a voice, rather than merely drawing on the governments' policy.

The overall aim was to triangulate information and reveal conceptual frameworks relating to school readiness, pedagogy, and curricula when analysing data from the questionnaire and the teacher interviews. It was expected that the chosen qualitative research approach supported the aims of this study: understanding a phenomenon, applying critical theory, and understanding six-year-olds curriculum and how it is viewed (Kumar, 2014). According to Kumar (2014, 20), combining different methods will improve the depth and accuracy of the findings.

The next chapter will move on to the findings and evaluation of English and Finnish teachers' perceptions on children's school readiness, including their perceptions on curriculum policy and how this relates to teachers' pedagogy.

Chapter V - Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the semi-structured interview findings, comparing teachers' views, feelings and beliefs about the current curricula and whether they felt these support the age-related practices and the best educational attainments for the six-year-old children.

The following findings and discussion are based on 17 English, Year 2 teachers, from 12 primary schools including the three English pilot-study teachers, and 20 Finnish teachers, from 6 different pre-schools. Teachers participated in two specific research elements comprising a short questionnaire and semi-structured interview. According to Bernard (2013, 395), "Analysis is the search for patterns in data and for ideas that help explain why those patterns are there in the first place." These respondents were selected because they were able to provide information about the school culture and describe it in great detail and from extensive experience.

The collected results are reported in the following order. Firstly, the results from the teachers' short questionnaires (Appendix 8) used to represent the chosen cohort of participants, and therefore establishing general patterns across the distinct backgrounds for this study (England and Finland). The questionnaire included a total of nine questions: four closed-ended questions and five open-ended questions and they were collected from the participants prior to the semi-structured interview. Next the short questionnaires are analysed to show the common trends between the participant groups and later how these related to the semi-structured interview data.

Secondly, the semi-structured interview results are based on the 17 English and 20 Finnish participants. The responses have been analysed and the findings presented in comparable tables. In order to ensure the reliability of the research, direct quotations from the teachers from both countries have been included.

In the next part, all the findings are synthesised in order to comment on what is the teachers' perceptions of the current curriculum and whether the educational practices support the six-year-old children's education in England and Finland.

5.1 Teachers' Short Questionnaires: Findings and Discussion

This section will present and analyse the teachers' questionnaire findings successively and synthesise the information to reveal overall findings from this research. Teachers' short questionnaires were aimed to represent the chosen cohort of participants, and therefore establishing general patterns across the distinct backgrounds for this study (England and Finland). I was able to collect the questionnaires personally before the semi-structured interview took place, therefore the return rate was 100%. The short questionnaires are expected to show the universal trends between the participants and countries' education systems.

Question 1: *Are you male or female?*

The first question asked the participants gender. All participants (100%) were female from both countries. This outcome was expected since a huge gender imbalance still exists in primary schools' workforce (Mistry and Sood, 2016, 283).

Question 2: *What is your highest qualification?*

The second question examined teachers' highest qualification. Both groups of teachers have to hold at minimum a bachelor's degree to be able to teach six-year-old children in government-based schools. Teachers in English primary schools have a bachelor's degree (BA), PGCE Primary, B.Ed. (Hons) or master's degree and are therefore qualified for teaching this age group. In this study 88% of the English teachers had a bachelor's degree, B.Ed. (Hons) or PGCE Primary degree. 12% of the English teachers had a master's degree.

The Finnish teachers are required to hold a pre-school teacher qualification; this is equivalent to a bachelor's degree (3-year university), including a kindergarten teacher education degree (Havu-Nuutinen and Niikko, 2014, 623). Also, teachers with a master's degree (MA) qualify to teach pre-school groups (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019b, n/a). In this study 85% of the Finnish teachers held a bachelor's degree and 15% had a master's degree. In conclusion teachers' highest qualifications are very similar in both countries.

Teachers' highest qualification	English Teachers (N=17)		Teachers' highest qualification	Finnish Teachers (N=20)	
Category of Response	f	%	**Category of Response**	f	%
Bachelor's Degree/B.Ed. (Hons)/PGCE Primary	15	88	**Bachelor's Degree**	17	85
Master's Degree	2	12	**Master's Degree**	3	15

Table 9: *Teachers' Highest Qualifications by English and Finnish Participants*

Question 3: *Whilst studying, did you learn about child development theories (e.g. Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky, Fröbel)?*

The third question examined teachers' educational content and whether their studies included child development theories (e.g. Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky, Fröbel). All, with exception of one teacher from England, mentioned that their teacher education included relevant theories connected to child development.

Question 4 + 5: *Which ones? To what extent (years/credits)?*

The fourth question examined more closely which child development theories the participants recalled having during their teacher training. Even though these questions were piloted, it turned out to be problematical as 46% of teachers could not remember accurately which theorist or to what extent their university course included these.

Participants – England

Teacher	HQ	Years of Teaching Experience	Theories Mentioned	Extend
n/a = Teacher did not remember the extend of study module cr = Study credit				
Allison	BA (Hons), QTS	1-2	Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky, Froebel	n/a
Beth	B.Ed. (Hons)	over 10	Piaget, Bruner	1st 2 years of 4 year course
Claire	B.Ed. (Hons)	over 10	Piaget	n/a
Diana	BA (Hons)	over 10	Piaget, Vygotsky	throughout 4 years
Emma	PGCE Primary	6-10	Piaget, Vygotsky	3 years
Fiona	BA (Hons) PE	1-2	Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky, Froebel	50 cr
Grace	PGCE Primary	3-5	Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky, Froebel	⅓ a year over 4 year
Helen	BA (Hons)	over 10	Vygotsky	10 weeks
Irene	B.Ed. (Hons)	over 10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel	n/a
Julia	Master's Degree	over 10	did not study child development theories	
Kelly	PGCE Primary	1-2	Piaget, Erikson, Froebel	3 modules
Lea	B.Ed.	over 10	Froebel	n/a
Melissa	PGCE Primary	1-2	Piaget, Vygotsky	1 module
Nicole	BA (Hons)	1-2	Piaget, Vygotsky	Yr 3- Final year
Olivia	PGCE Primary	over 10	Piaget	n/a
Penny	Master's degree	6-10	Piaget	n/a
Ruth	BA	3-5	Piaget, Vygotsky	1 year

Table 10: *English Teachers' Responses to the Child Development Theories*

Of all the child development theorists Piaget and Vygotsky were by far the two most frequently mentioned by the English teachers. This fact was not at all dependent upon the number of years of practical experience the teachers reported having. (When asked about the length of their work experience, the teachers responses seemed to vary, perhaps according to differing concepts of the term's definition.) An online examination of Teacher Training course overviews indicates that the BA Honours course provides: "A strong focus on the core subjects of the curriculum" (University of Hull, 2020, n/a). Such an emphasis may indicate that child development theories are not considered of primary importance or central in regard to the education of primary school children. This may have been a factor in the English teachers' quite superficial acquaintance with child development theories.

Participants – Finland

Teacher	HQ	Years of Teaching Experience	Theories	Extend
n/a = Teacher did not remember the extend of study module cr = Study credit				
Auli	BA	1-2	Montessori	68cr
Birgitta	BA	6-10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel	n/a
Carita	BA (Hons)	over 10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel, Dewey	n/a
Elisa	BA (Hons)	over 10	Piaget, Froebel, Erikson	36cr
Heidi	BA	1-2	Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson	210cr
Iida	BA	over 10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, Froebel	120cr
Jaana	BA (Hons)	over 10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, Froebel	120cr
Katri	BA	over 10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel	n/a
Leena	BA	over 10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel	n/a
Minna	BA	over 10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, Froebel	120cr
Noora	BA	6-10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, Froebel	85cr
Oona	BA	6-10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, Froebel	n/a
Pauliina	BA (Hons)	over 10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel	n/a
Riitta	BA (Hons)	1-2	Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson	n/a
Senja	Master's degree	1-2	Vygotsky, Erikson, Dewey	n/a
Taina	BA	over 10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel	n/a
Ursula	BA (Hons)	over 10	Vygotsky, Froebel	n/a
Ulla	Master's degree	3-5	Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, Froebel	77cr
Veera	BA	6-10	Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, Froebel	120cr
Venla	Master's degree	1-2	Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, Dewey	n/a

Table 11: *Finnish Teachers' Responses to the Child Development Theories*

Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel and Erikson were the child development theorists most frequently mentioned by the Finnish teachers. As with the English teachers, Finnish teachers could not recall precisely the length or extent of their studies in regard to child development theory. The answers they provided to this question were diverse. Further, as with the English teachers, years of teaching experiences as related to theoretical knowledge did not yield valid information. It was therefore not possible to draw reliable conclusions on this question. Overall, one cautious conclusion that might be drawn is that the education of Finnish kindergarten teachers does include a broader range of the child development theories, e.g. Froebel and Dewey.

Child development theorist	Vygotsky	Piaget	Erikson	Fröbel	Bruner/ Dewey
English Teachers	10	14	4	5	1
Finnish Teachers	14	15	12	15	3

Table 12: *Compressed View of English and Finnish Teachers' Recollection of Relevant Child Development Theories*

Question 6: *Did any coursework cover play in education or learning through play during your teacher education?*

59% of English teachers (10/17) and 100% of the Finnish teachers (20/20) did recall that their coursework covered play or aspects of child development through play. As stated in the literature review, research suggests that highly educated staff appear to play a key role in achieving the best attainment results in later life. My research findings support the evidence that current teacher education may not place sufficient emphasis on developmentally appropriate practices or the importance of the role of play in older children's education.

Question 7: *How long have you been teaching?*

Years of Teaching	English Teachers (N=17)		Years of Teaching	Finnish Teachers (N=20)	
Category of Response	*f*	%	**Category of Response**	*f*	%
NQT year	0	0	**NQT year**	n/a	n/a
1-3 yrs.	5	29	**1-3 yrs.**	5	25
3-5 yrs.	2	12	**3-5 yrs.**	1	5
6-10 yrs.	2	12	**6-10 yrs.**	4	20
Over 10 yrs.	8	47	**Over 10 yrs.**	10	50

Table 13: *Teachers' Years of Teaching*

The teaching workforce in the United Kingdom is the youngest in the OECD according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operations and Development (OECD, 2019a, 6). In my questionnaire a difference between the number of years of teaching was not particularly noticeable. The most notable was the difference with respect to teachers with between 3-4 and 6-10yrs. of teaching experience. OECD (2019a, 6) statistics show that: 31% of primary teachers in England are: “Aged 30 or younger, compared to 13% on average across” (OECD, 2019a, 6). As stated in the literature review, this could suggest that without the relevant knowledge and *experience*, the young children’s education could lack a variety of pedagogical practises.

Question 8 and 9: *How many children are there in your current year group? How many teachers are there totally in your class?*

I have grouped the final two questions together, so as to make it easier to view the teacher / children ratio. This question did not take into account possible classroom teaching assistants (TA), nursery nurses, students or other staff, only teachers. The reason for this being that the availability of extra help is dependent upon variables such as funding or children’s extra needs. Furthermore, these can change for short periods of time and cannot be relied upon as a permanent support for the group. According to DfE (2014b, 23), in a class of 30+ six-year-old children, there might be only a single schoolteacher. In these findings, the average English classroom was 25 children/teacher. Department for Education statistics from June 2018 reported an average classroom size of 27.1. This finding is very similar with mine regarding England. According to OECD (2019b, 3) statistics, in Finland: “For children aged 3 to 6, there are only 10 children per teaching staff member, compared to 16 on average across OECD countries.” Again, my findings showed the average of 7.8 children/classroom in Finland.

How many children are there in your current group and how many teachers	Ratio: children/ teacher		How many children are there in your current group and how many teachers	Ratio: children/ teacher	
Category of Response	ratio	%	**Category of Response**	ratio	%
Primary 1	26/1	26	Pre-school 1	13/1	13
Primary 2	28/1	28	Pre-school 2	22/2	11
Primary 3a	30/1	30	Pre-school 3a	22/2	11
Primary 3b	30/1	30	Pre-school 3b	23/2	11.5
Primary 3c	30/1	30	Pre-school 4a	20/2	10
Primary 4	15/1	15	Pre-school 4b	17/1	17
Primary 5	33/1	33	Pre-school 5a	18/1	18
			Pre-school 5b	17/1	17
Primary 6	18/1	18	Pre-school 6a	23/2	11.5
Primary 7a	30/1	30	Pre-school 6b	20/2	10
Primary 7b	29/1	29	Pre-school 6c	22/2	11
Primary 7c	30/1	30			
Primary 8	12/1	12			
Primary 9	12/1	12			
Primary 10	31/1	31			
Primary 11	20/1	20			
Primary 12	30/1	30			
TOTAL	434/16	**25**	**TOTAL**	141/18	**7.8**

Table 14: *The Ratio of Teachers and Children in the Current Year Group*

In summary, these responses from the teachers' short questionnaires highlighted the chosen cohort of participants and illustrated the universal trends between the participants, establishing general backgrounds for this study (England and Finland). All participants were female and their required highest qualification to be able to teach six-year-old children in government-based settings were very similar in both countries (Table 14). The questionnaire examined participants' teacher education regarding child development theories whether their studies included child development theories (e.g. Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky, Fröbel). 97% of participating teachers revealed that their training included relevant theories connected to child development. However, when exploring the question further 58% of teachers did not remember exactly which ones and how many credits they studied. Researching teachers' knowledge regarding child development theories was seen important because highly educated staff are seen as an important element when supporting children's education. My questionnaire findings therefore could suggest that the current teachers may benefit from further courses on theories relating to child development and play practises. Because of the small sampling size, the difference between English and Finnish teaching years was not

exceptionally noticeable. The final questionnaire question resulted in expected outcomes when investigating how many children are in the classroom and the ratio of teachers. This questionnaire observed that the English teachers are accommodating higher teacher/child ratios (DfE, 2014b, 23), than the Finnish teacher in the same aged classroom. In conclusion this short questionnaire gives an overview on the interviewed teachers background, however it is not possible to draw fully reliable conclusions as the chosen cohort is insignificant.

The next part of the study will analyse the semi-structured interview findings.

5.2 Teachers' Interviews: Findings and Discussion

This section will present and analyse the main semi-structured interview findings successively and synthesise the information to achieve an argument. The data presentation design will vary depending on the nature of the interview question. The tables are displayed using frequency and percentage. All the participants were treated anonymously, and their names have been changed to pseudonyms.

Table 15. *What Does the Phrase: "Ready for School" Bring to Your Mind?*

What does the phrase "ready for school" bring to your mind?		**What does the phrase "ready for school" bring to your mind?**	
Category of Response	English Teachers (N=17) f	**Category of Response**	Finnish Teachers (N=20) f
Social and Emotional Skills:		**Social and Emotional Skills:**	
Ready to learn	12	Still practicing school readiness skills, learns to learn	4
A child is confident / independent e.g. takes care of his own matters and acts independently: e.g. eating, dressing, toileting	8	A child is confident / independent e.g. takes care of his own matters and acts independently: e.g. eating, dressing, toileting	14
A child is ready to listen and concentrate e.g. sitting and working at the table	10	A child is ready to listen and concentrate	11
Understands how to work in a group e.g. share, communication, taking turns	7	Understands how to work in a group: Follows the instructions and acts upon them, interpersonal skills, knows how to solve conflicts by talking	19

A child is aware of how to be a friend	4	A child is aware of how to be a friend	5
Academic Skills:		**Academic Skills:**	
E.g. recognises numbers to fifty and knows the alphabet, some words	7	Recognises some numbers and letters	4
No need for Academic Skills	2	**No need for Academic Skills**	5
Self-Regulation Skills:		**Self-Regulation Skills:**	
	n/a	Resistance to disappointments, controls one's emotions/behaviour	11
General Issues:		**General Issues:**	
A child is sincerely enthusiastic about learning new skills	4	A child is sincerely enthusiastic about learning new skills	7

The first interview question was aimed at finding out how the participants regarded the expression "ready for school". Table 15 summarises teachers' responses from both countries. Subsequently, following coding of the interviews four themes were revealed: a) child's social skills, b) child's academic skills, c) physical skills and d) child's general interest in learning.

The pre-school year was considered, by all of the Finnish teachers, as a time to develop and further improve on the six-year-old children's readiness skills (e.g. practicing independence, regulating one's emotions/behaviour), while 12 English teachers out of 17 saw school readiness as being a synonym for *ready to learn*. The English teachers' response corroborates the ideas of Scott-Little et al. (2006, 154) who evaluated the historical conceptualisation of school readiness. The demands were made on the child's developmental domains as "readiness for school" and was seen "as a fixed or prerequisite set of physical, intellectual and/or

social skills needed in order for children to be able to fulfil the requirements of the school environment" (Scott-Little et al., 2006, 154).

> *"Oh, yes it means that the children are…mature enough to be able to take in learning."* – Melissa –
> *"It's a certain level of maturity…ermmm…certain level of readiness to learn."* – Helen –
> *"That children are ready to learn."* – Julia –

In Finland the pre-school's aim is to practice and improve on school readiness skills further before starting primary school at the age of seven (FNBE, 2016).

> *"Täällä harjoitellaan niitä taitoja, mitä sitten siellä koulussa tarvitaan."* – *Senja* –
> *"Here (preschool) we practice the skills that are then needed at school."*

Overall, these responses brought forth the reflections of a mixture of teachers across all levels of experience from both countries, revealing very similar views as to what kind of skills the school ready child should have.

Generally, the children's social skills were seen as critical by all the teachers and referred to a whole set of comparable features including: physical, cognitive and socio-emotional aspects as described by Ahonen, et al. (1995, 170) and Linnilä (2006 and 2011, 42). However, when analysing the interviews, there were contrasting views between the ratio of answers.

In both countries the majority of teachers across all levels of teaching experience emphasised school readiness skills and valued highly children's confidence and maturation, along with management of their basic physical needs independently, e.g. eating, dressing, use of toilet. Children's confidence was also reflected in their ability to manage the school setting.

> *"Been toilet trained."* – Penny –
>
> *"Pystyy omatoimisesti oleen siel koulussa ja isossa ryhmässä toimimaan*, *huolehtiin omista tavaroista ja asioista*." – Oona –
>
> *"Can get by on own at school and in a big group, take care of own belongings and things."*
>
> *"They have got the emotional capacity to be comfortable in these surroundings."* – Grace –

Overall, 14 Finnish teachers out of 20 valued independence skills higher than 8 English teachers out of 17. One of the reasons might be that the majority of Finnish children are expected to travel to and from school unsupervised during the ensuing school years. Therefore, the pre-school year is seen as a safe place to practise those skills.

The child's ability to *listen and concentrate* was regarded highly by both participant groups across all levels of teaching experience.

> *"…Being able to listen and concentrate…and ermm…yeah, it's mainly those two really"* – Ruth –
>
> *"So, children who can concentrate and sit are ready to learn…really."* – Irene –
>
> *"...Jaksaa keskittyä ja kuunnella…"* – Senja –
> *"...Can concentrate and listen..."*

The vast majority of the Finnish teachers felt that the children's ability to work in group situations is paramount, such as the ability to take turns, not to disturb others and be able to listen to the teacher's instructions and act upon them.

> *"Osaa ryhmässä toimia, tulee toisten kanssa toimeen ja jaksaa odottaa vuoroaan ja kertoa omia mielipiteitään ja tämmösiä."* – Elisa –
>
> *"Can work in a group, get along with others and wait their turn and tell their own opinions and that kind of stuff."*

Furthermore, across all levels of experience 19 out of 20 Finnish teachers expect the children to take responsibility for their own actions, and further enhance their interpersonal skills in managing and solving peer related conflicts through communication.

> *"Osaa tota olla...kaveri ja osaa niinku mahdollisimman monen kanssa leikkiä ja pärjää, ja osaa tota...riidat selvittää puhumalla. Ei tarvi käyttää nyrkkiä..."* – Veera –
>
> *"Knows...mmmm...how to be...a friend and how to play with lots of others and knows how to...mmmm...solve...disputes by talking. No need to use their fists..."*

The majority of the Finnish teachers mentioned the importance of the child's understanding of how to work in a group. Less than half of English the teachers, mentioned this. This rather interesting result could be explained by curriculum requirements, which in England focus on a child's individual participation and achievement in academic work rather than on group work and play. Whereas the

Finnish curriculum's focus is working in: "Cooperation with others and set goals for their own and shared activities" (FNBE, 2016, 22).

Both groups of teachers across all levels of experience valued the importance of how to be a good friend and having good friendships in promoting happiness. Also, the children who are expected to be school ready are to have good communication skills enabling them to form those friendships.

> *"Definitely need to be able to…converse properly and understand the language, because without that it's very difficult for them to…learn anything really. Their social skills are really important for them because, it's, it's the friendships, it's feeling happy at school it's…you know. If they are not happy there, they're not…happy to learn…sort of. Yeah."* – Melissa –

This data supports the findings of Seligman, et al. (2009, 293) who found that when pupils experienced happiness in their school context it correlated with higher levels of academic engagement, achievement and personal fulfilment.

Academic skills were viewed as significantly important by the Finnish teachers (4 out of 20), whereas nearly half of the English teachers expected children to master some basic number and writing skills.

> *"They're ready for school when they can follow the curriculum."* – Nicole –
>
> *"…Write their names, write the sentence, basic number skills…"* – Diana –

2 out of 17 English teachers, and 5 out of 20 Finnish teachers, expressed the opinion that academic skills are not a clear indication of being school ready.

> *"I think being able to…take care of themselves, rather than academic things."* – Emma –
>
> *"I wouldn't have an expectation in terms of what they can already…do, or…I've never worked that way down it…being ready for school is more about the age."* – Ruth –

The English teachers did not mention *the concept of self-regulation* itself, although the participants did comment on different elements of self-regulation skills as being school readiness skills. Over half of the Finnish teachers across all levels of experience mentioned children's resistance to disappointments and ability to control personal emotions and actions as very important in pre-school.

“Ja sitten oli vielä ne itsesäätelyntaidot. Että tietää vähän lapsi, että koska on niinku aika kuunnella ja koska on aika leikkiä. Että osaa vähän erottaa niitä tilanteita toisistaan ja osaa toimia sen mukaan.” – Ulla –

“And then there’s those self-regulation skills. That the child knows when it's ...like time to listen and when's the time to play. Being able to see the difference in situations and know how to act appropriately.”

“Ne muut asiat tulee sitten kun se (itsesäätelytaito) asia on kunnossa.” – Ursula –

“Those other things will follow when that’s (self-regulation skill) in order.”

The responses of the Finnish teachers are in line with Whitebread’s (2012, 137) views on children’s increasing competence to take responsibility for their learning and become *self-regulating* learners. The Finnish teachers’ responses could likewise be linked to Blair (2002, 111) who stated that the main focus should be on working with others and developing self-regulation skills. There are also other studies that have suggested that children’s social emotional readiness is one of the most essential elements in classroom management (Akman et al., 2017, 36).

In addition, the concept of self-regulation is recognised and explicitly stated in Finland’s pre-school curriculum.

> “Children’s capabilities for learning, social skills and positive self-image are strengthened as they develop capabilities for structuring the world around them. These capabilities evolve as children explore, interpret and express themselves and the world by practising different skills of expression. This practising also supports the development of children’s ability to focus and self-regulate.” (FNBE, 2016, 41)

Finally, 4 out of 17 English teachers and 7 out of 20 Finnish teachers felt that a child’s genuine enthusiasm for learning was an important sign of school readiness. Both groups across their teaching experience considered the good self-esteem as a key factor in reinforcing children’s enthusiasm towards learning new things, being receptive, having courage and trusting their own problem-solving skills to achieve this.

“I can just picture a curious and enthusiastic child full…of questions and open to learning. That's what I would expect from a child who's ready for school.” – Claire –

”Into tavallaan siihen oppimiseen että, se on niinku ihana asia, että mää opin uutta.” – Senja –

“Enthusiasm, kind of, towards learning that, it is, like, a wonderful thing that I learned something new.”

Overall, most of the English teachers expected the six-year-child to be ready to learn whereas Finnish teachers still thought of the six-year-old child as developing and practising their school readiness skills (e.g. self-regulation, working in the group). In Finland teachers’ pedagogy encourages learning in small increments and therefore aiding school readiness gradually. These findings suggest that most of the ready for school skill statements were seen as fairly comparable in both participating groups. Differing responses regarding self-regulation could be explained by curriculum requirements. The second interview question will analyse teachers’ views on the outcomes of Year 2 in England and the pre-school year in Finland, and what possibly has been achieved.

Table 16. *What Do you Consider is the Outcome of the Year and What are the Children Expected to Learn Specifically During that Year?*

Expected skills in the end of the term?		**Expected skills in the end of the term?**	
Category of Response	English Teachers (N=17) f	**Category of Response**	Finnish Teachers (N=20) f
Social and Emotional Skills: able to control emotions e.g. disappointments, growth in mindset, responsible for themselves, respectful with other children, sit and concentrate, be a good friend, independency, solve arguments	6	**Social and Emotional Skills:** e.g. able to work as a group with everyone, taking care of own belongings, interpersonal and listening skills, able to calm down, follow instructions, get along with the other children, settlement of disputes, making friends, have the courage to be in a group	16
High Academic Skills:		**Low Academic Skills:**	
Literacy: reading confidently, comprehension and understanding of their reading etc.	9	**Literacy**: knows most of the letters, including the letters in his name, some letter sounds	14
Writing: fully joined up fluent handwriting, write a simple story, write for different purposes e.g. instructions, able to read their joined handwriting etc.	12	**Writing:** pencil grip, using scissors	2
Maths: 2's, 3's, 5's and 10's timetables, fractions of amounts, problem solving, numbers up to hundred, four operations, name of the 2D/3D shapes and their descriptions, time to quarter hours, measuring etc.	15	**Maths:** numbers between 1-20, time to the hour and the half hour, money	15
SPaG: capital letters, full stops, question and exclamation marks,	13		

apostrophes, different conjunctions to join the sentences, punctuate sentences correctly, prefixes and suffixes, 'and', 'but', 'and', 'but' and 'or', common exception words etc.			
General knowledge: about health and the world around them, enthusiasm for being outdoors and sports	2	**Child's own motivation and enthusiasm:** happy and desires to learn, good self-image, confidence and coping	12
n/a		**Learning-to-learn skills**	5

Table 16 summarises the teachers' understandings of what specific skills they would expect from the children as an outcome of the year. The English teachers' responses came under the following themes: a) child's academic skills: literacy, writing, SPaG and maths, b) social and emotional skills and c) general knowledge.

Academic Skills [England]

The English teachers focus was on the *academic* outcomes. The key mission for primary education (DfE, 2014a, 5) in England is to promote: "The spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepare pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life."

All English teachers mentioned that age-related expectations of children's academic skills have risen because of recent changes in the National Curriculum framework (DfE, 2014a).

> *"The age-related expectations for Year 2 have now actually gone into Key Stage 2...so personally, it has been a struggle this year because the expectations have gone up."* – Julia –
>
> *"I just put: too much. It needs to be less. Done more thoroughly. That's what I think. And, you know, and…they do…go over things. They do reinforce things, but it's kind of ready for the SATs…You know, a tick for this and a tick for that. Obviously, we need them to get to a certain standard, but we seem to always be pushing them. This new curriculum seems to be, you know, it's tough that…I'm not sure it's what Year 2 should be doing."* – Claire –

Throughout the interviews the concerns of the English teachers were apparent. The high expectations were a cause for worry among the teachers; more specifically they were concerned about whether they were teaching the most suitable age appropriate objectives.

> *"And I'm very concerned. These things that they're supposed to understand. A lot of our children really, I mean, if you look at theory, children are supposed to be working in Concrete Operations at this age."* – Penny –

Penny is commenting upon her own understanding of child development theory and the demands of the current curriculum. She also appeared to be expressing her anxiety over whether some of the children's understanding is yet capable of achieving the presented higher-level targets. The English teachers' responses were thus related to the strong emphasis on academic content. Teachers concerns were linked to the suitability of the curriculum's content and whether the practices are developmentally appropriate. As mentioned in the literature review, high curriculum demands could impact on a child's social and emotional learning (Usakli and Ekici, 2018, 72). The following will analyse these requirements as they relate to core subjects.

From a list of several National Curriculum targets, the four main core subjects mentioned by the English teachers were: literacy, writing, SPaG and maths (see Table 16). One of the participants refused to list any outcomes for Year 2 children because she felt it would take too long to go through them all.

> *"Well that's too broad. There is so many areas that you can't possibly say in…in a short time cause there is...for each area, the standards what they have to achieve, so that would take a long time."* – Lea –

Lea's response implies possible frustration with the numerous National Curriculum targets. The next section will analyse various other participants' comments pertaining to these four subjects, namely literacy, writing, maths, SPaG.

Literacy [England]

Teachers expected that nearly every child should be able to read confidently and fluently by the end of Year 2. The children should be able to understand what they are reading, find information and grasp the main underlying idea behind the text.

> *"Where they can confidently read…between 90-95% fluency."* – Beth –
>
> *"For literacy I'd expect them to be able to read…fluently and understand what they are reading.*" – Irene –
>
> *"Reading it's been able to do comprehensive questions, reading the questions to themselves and been able to find that information. And reading between the lines a little bit more as well."* – Grace –
>
> *"In reading, they're meant to be able to read…is it 90 words a minute? Which is…a lot for them."* – Melissa –

According to the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a, 16) children at the end of Year 2 should be able to read age-appropriate-levelled books accurately, and at a speed that helps them to comprehend what they have read. In practice however it may well be that all children do not attain fluency in reading.

> *"But passing the Phonics Screening Check in Year 1, does not mean you can read while in Year 2. Because they're completely different skills in Year 2 the emphasis is really on comprehension."* – Penny –

Responses such as these illustrate that the demands for fluent reading can be experienced as too high. Whether this has negative consequences for later learning can be argued. Supporting research indicates that, if a child falls behind with his education, it is difficult to catch up and learning gaps among learners begin to appear (Burchinal, 2018; Lamy, 2013, 32). Janus and Offord (2007, 1-2) suggested that even small differences in academic achievement at an early age: "Tend to intensify over the years rather than converge."

Writing [England]

Children's writing skills were mentioned by most of the English teachers. The children are expected to write for different purposes, for example to write instructions or a simple story and be able to engage the reader. The National

Curriculum states (DfE, 2014a, 16) that good handwriting habits should be established from the beginning and that “they should be able to form individual letters correctly.” English teachers mentioned that the children’s handwriting needs to be fully joined up and they need to be able to read their own handwriting.

> *“Be able to write a simple story…kind of…I would think about a page long. I’d like, I’d like to be able to read their handwriting.”* – Beth –
>
> *“And just be able to write with a bit more of variety to be able to engage the reader.”* – Grace –
>
> *“…fully joined up fluent handwriting.”* – Julia –

It might be noted here that due to the ever-increasing use of keyboards, mobile phones and other devices in August 2016 the Finnish National Board for Education (FNBE, 2020) revised the model letters and ceased using cursive handwriting in August 2016. FNBE has replaced traditional cursive handwriting lessons with a focus on keyboard skills (FNBE, 2020, n/a).

Maths [England]

15 out of 17 English teachers mentioned maths in their comments. By the end of the year, they felt, children should, or were required to, be able to count to a hundred, master four operations, 2’s, 3’s, 5’s and 10’s timetables and fractions of amounts. Furthermore, the children should be able to solve maths problems, identify 2D and 3D shapes and to describe the shape. Knowing how to tell time in quarter hours and for "smart kids" to five minutes was also cited.

> *“For maths they’d have to…be able to add and subtract and divide and multiply. They’d have to know all their shapes. There’s so much really. They’d have to…ermmm…be aware of their timetables.”* – Irene –
>
> *“Children are having to be able to add and take away two-digit, digit numbers in their head. Including regrouping. Ermmm…they are expected in 2s, 3s, 4s, 5s and 10 times table…by heart. Their supposed to know their number bonds of by heart. Ermm…they need to know fractions of amounts. Fractions of shapes, so, quarter half, third and three quarters. But they also need to now know the equivalent fractions.”* – Penny –
>
> *“I'd like them to be able to tell the time to quarter hours. My brighter ones, I’d like them to be able to tell 5 minutes. I'd like them to know… centimetres for length, aaa…kilograms for weight and mass. And about capacity too, their 2D, 3D shapes, I’d like to be able to describe them in terms of number of sides, number of edges, number of vertices.”* – Julia –

These English curriculum academic demands are notably higher than those set by the Finnish pre-school curriculum.

SPaG [England]

13 out of 17 English teachers mentioned SPaG standards for spelling, punctuation and grammar. The National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a) focuses strongly on the SPaG skills. The list cited by the teachers included for example: children's ability to use capital letters, full stops, question and exclamation marks. Furthermore, apostrophes, conjunctions to join sentences, the use of prefixes and suffixes and the knowledge of the most common spelling exception words were expected from the children by the end of the term.

> *"A lot more spelling rules in Year 2 and all the different forms of sentences. Ermmm…so…length as well, being able to write."* – Ruth –
>
> *"So, we have to use contractions, so it's apostrophes for omission, apostrophe for possession for our more able children."* – Penny –
>
> *"Rules following the different spelling…the prefixes and suffixes."* – Olivia –
>
> *"They are expected to use capital letters, full stops, exclamation marks but only for how or what…question marks…"* – Julia –

English teachers were dissatisfied with the new SPaG demands. According to English National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a, 6) SPaG, "...introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said; and helps engender an appreciation of *human creativity* and achievement." However, 4 out 17 teachers believed that creativity is diminished, especially in children's writing, because focus is centred on grammatical details. These responses were presented by teachers with relatively more teaching experience.

> *"Whereas, in previous ye…years we'd had really expressive piece of writing. Lots of details, description from natural writers. And for some children, having to get these things into their writing has stifled their creativity, it has."* – Diana –
>
> *"We need to write exclamations, commands, questions, statements. And know the difference between those sorts of sentences. And I feel that sometimes we're having to put them in, to prove that we can do them rather than because they flow naturally. And to be honest exclamations*

don't flow naturally in a 6- year-old. It is not how they speak and…so, I feel some of it is forced." – Penny –

"I mean, some of…the SPaG-stuff. Some of the grammar stuff. I mean, I did literacy in university. And I can remember some of the phrases from there. Why do the children need to know them when they're 7-years-old? I just don't think that, that's going to make them into brilliant writers. Do you know what I mean? We might not get any poets or…or authors. Because, they'll all be worried about…where commas go and…if they need an exclamation mark." – Claire –

As stated earlier, the English National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a, 6) claims to support: "…an appreciation of human creativity and achievement." However, the English teachers with more teaching experience appeared to disagree with this statement as they commented on the loss of creative writing that follows from an increased focus on spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Social and Emotional Skills [England]

Whereas Finnish teachers mentioned firstly social and emotional skills, English teachers did not. This could be because, as nearly half of the English teachers mentioned earlier (Table 16) social and emotional skills are already practiced in the Reception and Year 1, therefore the children may be presumed to be socially and emotionally ready.

The National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a, 6) states that: "There is time and space in the school day and in each week, term and year to range beyond the National Curriculum specifications." This statement implies that these skills could be practised during the school year. However, Melissa expressed her views incisively as to why social skills are not the focus when teaching National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a) and why she feels these should be.

"I think it's focusing too much on the academics and not on the social side. Cause they're still little, they need…to be kids. They need to enjoy it. And there is too much pressure on, getting the basics in, their maths and English and forgetting that actually they need to…learn how to make friends. Learn how to…talk to each other. How to solve arguments, or whatever. I think that's just as important." – Melissa –

Only 6 out of 17 English teachers (including Melissa) stated one or more of the afore-mentioned social, emotional and self-regulation skills. Some of the children were seen as young and lacking maturity. Basic behavioural skills such as their ability to listen, concentrate and control their emotions were felt to be sometimes missing or needing improvement.

> *"So, maturity it's been big…a big issue. Ermmm…their ability to listen and to concentrate for…a sustained period of time and absorb what we're teaching them."* – Helen –
>
> *"I would expect them to be able to control their emotions."* – Grace –
>
> *"If they can't sit and concentrate, then I've got a hard job getting them to the level that they should be."* – Irene –

Penny and Melissa also mentioned that because of their families' socio-economic background and lack of good parenting some children are not supported at home and therefore, they might not be ready to learn. Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education and circle time lessons were designed to support these children especially, but the roadblock seemed to be lack of time and the emphasis on the core subjects instead.

> *"We have some children who have massive social issues. Children who have home lives that mean…they are not ready…to learn every morning, some of them come in hungry. Some of them come in…tired. Ermm…some of them come in worried. And this is an awful lot to put on top of them. There needs to be more time. And we do…planning lots of PSHE, lots of circle times. But the massive emphasis…is on most core subjects: reading, writing, maths. Which is really sad."* – Penny –
>
> *"Like circle time and PSHE…that goes on the back burner because that's just not… as important…while in school terms, you know what I mean. It's not…pushed the same. So…but I think it's a bit unfair. I also just think… they're six and seven…it's just a lot to ask them. They are so young."* – Melissa –

At the end of the school year English teachers were expecting the children to be more independent and responsible for themselves, including showing respectful behaviour towards each other in social situations.

> *"And be able to ermmm…have progressed socially and be able to do sort of…when you see them at playtime, they can…ermmm…they can sort of play…respectfully with other children and follow up as play…or, or lead play."* – Grace –

"We've done an awful lot work on those: friendship and teamwork...We really are about making our children independent learners." – Olivia –

"And also, being again more responsible for themselves by the end of Year 2. I'm thinking rather a whole child, so if, if they haven't got a pencil, they can go and find one without asking. Those kind of skills as well." – Emma –

Grace and Penny noted that the children mature during Year 2 and are able to tolerate conflicts better within their learning.

"I've noticed that by the time they get into Year 2 they realise, that ermmm… it's ok to make mistakes in their learnings. Ermmm…and that they can correct things and that's fine. It's ok to understand…if you don't understand something." – Grace –

"We look at mind set. Quite a lot of growth in mindset, and we say: 'You made a mistake, good. You are really learning now. We shouldn't get everything right and try and make them more resilient." – Penny –

Grace and Penny saw Year 2 also facilitating children's maturation in respect to working methods and strengthening their resilience in learning.

Only 3 out of 17 English teachers mentioned other topics, for example science or PE.

"In terms of the topics…I can see where the government's gone with these changes. And the fact that they are wanting to deepen and broaden children's understanding. But it's hard to get six and seven-year-olds to think really deeply... on those bigger questions because they don't naturally do it. We don't. So, we've spent a lot of time teaching questioning skills and how to…think deeply…if you like. Which is, is hard…it is." – Diana –

"I want them to know something about the world and have some kind of general knowledge. And I think particularly in this day and age, I like them to be very ahmm…physically aware and know about being healthy. And to…to have some enthusiasm for being outdoors and sport and things like that." – Beth –

"For science, they'd have to…explain what they've done, why they've done it and if they've done it fairly. And understand the seasons and the world around them really." – Irene –

Again, these responses were presented by teachers with relatively more teaching experience.

In conclusion, when asking English teachers' views on children's desired outcomes at the end of the term the participants' focus was largely on the core

subjects: literacy, writing, maths and SPaG. Teachers' general impressions were that the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a) has increased age-related expectations for the six-year-olds. Throughout the interviews there was a clear sense that these high expectations are a cause for discomfort amongst teachers. The English teachers seem to doubt some of their own actions and changes in curriculum had made them speculate as to whether the assigned targets are age appropriate. Only a few English teachers, mentioned social and emotional skills as term outcome goals. These observations were made by teachers with relatively more teaching experience. Overall, the general feeling was that education is profoundly focused on academics and not on social skills.

The next section will deal with the Finnish teachers' responses to the same questions and issues.

Following analysis, the Finnish teachers' responses came under the following four themes: a) a child's social and emotional skills, b) academic skills, c) a child's own motivation and enthusiasm and d) learning-to-learn skills.

Social and Emotional Skills [Finland]

Several desired social skills were mentioned by all Finnish teachers across all levels of experience. These skills are enumerated below (Table 16). The children's development of good social skills, or in other words, socio-emotional awareness, was the most mentioned outcome of the pre-school year.

> *"Kyllä mää korostan kaikkein eniten kuitenkin sitä...sosiaalisuutta ja...sitä ryhmässä olemista."* – Iida –
>
> *"Yes, most of all, I emphasise...their sociability and...being a group member."*
>
> *"Mä pidän todella ensin niinku tärkeenä sitä sosiaalista ja niinku...sosio-emotionaalisia taitoja."* – Noora –
>
> *"I put above all, as most important, social and the...socio-emotional skills."*
>
> *"Ne tämmöset sosiaali-emotionaaliset [valmiudet]."* – Taina –
>
> *"These so-called socio-emotional [readiness skills]."*

Children's ability to function socially together as a group was seen as essential: getting along with other children, making friends, knowing on how to work as a team member, and being able to get along with everyone. During the pre-school year the children are also expected to learn how to communicate and on their own solve disagreements through negotiation. "Children are guided to recognise their emotions, act in a friendly and responsible manner and to constructively solve conflicts among themselves" (FNBE, 2016, 47).

> *"No sanosin, että kaikista tärkein on ne vuorovaikutustaidot: Sosiaaliset suhteet, yhdessä toimiminen, ristiriitatilanteiden selvittäminen itse ...vuorottelu ja jakaminen ja neuvottelutaidot ja kaikki ne mitä tarvitaan joka asiassa."* – Carita –
>
> *"Well, I would say that the most important thing is the interpersonal skills: Social relationships, working together, solving conflicts on your own initiative...taking turns and sharing and negotiating skills and all those things what are needed all the time."*
>
> *"Ja mää noista kavereitaioista aattelin, että semmonen riitojen ratkaseminen. Siihen niitä taitoja, että ku tullee kavereitten kans erimielisyyksiä, että miten ne ratkastaan iliman, että nyrkit heiluu...että kaikkien kans ollaan ja kaikkien kans leikitään."* – Leena –
>
> *"Yup, when I think about the kids' friendship skills, and like the way they solve disagreements. They need those skills when they have arguments, that the fists don't fly...so that everyone is able to be friends, and everyone plays with everyone else."*

Social skills included interpersonal and listening skills, the children's capability to calm down and follow the teacher's instructions and wait their turn were all also mentioned by Finnish teachers as vital outcomes of the pre-school year.

> *"Ja sitten...oppii kuuntelemaan ohjeita. Rauhoittuu toimintaan ja toimii tehtävät tilanteessa, pystyy toimimaan ryhmässä ja huolehtii omista tavaroistaan."* – Heidi –
>
> *"And then...learns to listen to the instructions. Calms down and works on the tasks at hand, is able to work in a group and takes care of his / her own belongings."*
>
> "*Huolehtimaan ittestään, oppia olemaan ryhmässä, oppia kuuntelemaan, toimia opettajan ohjeitten mukaan."* – Jaana –
>
> *"Take care of yourself, learn to be in a group, learn to listen, follow teacher's instructions."*
>
> *"'No sit just nää itsesäätelyntaidot. Et sen, että se lapsi just oppis et: Hei, että nyt pitää kuunnella nyt on se aika, tän mä istun ja kuuntelen ja...nyt saa sitte taas mennä."* – Ulla –

"Well, these self-regulation skills everybody talks about. So, that a child learns that: Hey, now's time to listen, now I sit and just listen...now I can go and do something else."

16 out of 20 Finnish teachers commented on the importance of the different social readiness skills as the expected outcome of the year. One of the key social skills was the child's ability to learn how to be, and act as a group member. The children are together and therefore, they need to learn to tolerate each other. Children's ability to develop their socio-emotional awareness, learning to take care of themselves and learning to listen and follow the given instructions were the most commented upon outcome of the pre-school year. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, Finnish pre-school pedagogy (FNBE, 2016, 20) emphasises the importance of acting as a group member, acquiring social skills and participating in active learning. Play pedagogy is deemed to be a strong element supporting social skills and healthy self-esteem (FNBE, 2016, 19).

Academic Skills [Finland]

Most of the Finnish teachers stated during the interview, that social skills are more important than academic skills. Finnish teachers mentioned that for them the curriculum serves as a guide and is not focused on academic domains or goals. The key mission for pre-primary education in Finland is to promote the child's prerequisites for growth, development and learning-to-learn.

"Meillä on esiopetussuunnitelma joka, ohjaa meitä ja siihen tukeudutaan mutta meillähän ei oo semmosta...tulostavoitta. Että me niinku... ...lapsille...tuodaan vaan nämä tämmöiset tietyt asiat niinku eteen ja he oppii niistä sitte minkä oppii ja omalla tasollansa. Että, ei ole sellaista että kaikkien pitäis oppia kaikkia asioita." – Noora –

"We have the pre-school curriculum that guides us and we rely on it, but we don't have like...specific achievement goals. So, we kind of offer these certain possibilities to the children and they'll learn from them at their own level. It is not that everyone should learn all things."

In order to compare the academic skills here, I had to ask the Finnish teachers specifically about literacy and maths because they did not mention these without prodding. This could suggest that participants were not even considering these

concepts important for children at this stage. Obviously, social skills are priority learning for six-year-old children in Finland. Contrary to the English curriculum, the Finnish pre-school curriculum does not specify targets or require objectives for achievement in literacy, writing or maths at the end of the year. Literacy, maths and writing were the chosen subjects as they were the most engaged interview topic by the English teachers. Furthermore, they are included here because of the stark contrast between the counties.

Literacy [Finland]

According to the FNBE (2016, 43), “The mission is to support the development of children’s linguistic skills from a comprehensive perception of the meaning of language towards more specific observation of its structures and form.” In Finland there's a strong emphasis on language as a whole, not just phonics, literacy or SPaG. Most of the Finnish pre-school teachers were fostering a knowledge of the alphabet, particularly the letters in a child’s name and some letter sound skills which teachers believed to be important when transitioning to primary school. In addition, the Finnish pre-school curriculum’s mission is to promote children’s linguistic development and interactive skills and to strengthen their interest in languages and cultures. Pre-primary pedagogy promotes the development of linguistic awareness in children by: “Playing with language and rhymes and versatile familiarisation with spoken and written language” (FNBE, 2016, 44). “Children are instructed to perceive that speech can be divided into smaller segments, such as words, sentences and phonemes” (FNBE, 2016, 45). During the pre-school year all the letters are taught to children. The letters are taught in contexts that are meaningful for the children.

> *“Äidinkielestähän me käydään kaikki kirjaimet läpi...katsotaan syksyllä ja keväällä, että mitä kukakin tunnistaa ja sitte, että onko menty eteenpäin näissä.” – Carita –*
>
> *“In literacy, we go through all the letters...check them in the autumn and spring, so we see who knows what, and then later whether or not they have made progress in these.”*

The reading and writing skills that children are developing are supported through play and functional exercises such as nursery rhymes, poems and children's literature (FNBE, 2016, 43).

> "*Lorua, loruttelua, riimittelyä...mitkä niinkun edistää niitä lukemaan oppimisen valmiuksia." – Veera –*
>
> *"Rhyme, rhyming, poems...which will help towards reading readiness."*

By the end of the term Finnish children's expected literacy skills were: recognition the basic letter sounds, the alphabet or at least the recognition of the letters in their own name.

> "*Vähintäänkin ne oman nimen kirjaimet, mutta tietenkin ois parempi jos kaikki, kaikki kirjaimet ois jo."* – Heidi –
>
> *"At least those letters of their own name, but of course better if they know all the letters already."*
>
> *"Tutustunut äänteisiin ja tavuttamiseen."* – Jaana –
>
> *"Know sounds and syllables."*

The pre-school curriculum recognises children's individual skills and interest and therefore they are encouraged to recognise and produce letters, words and texts in different ways together and independently (FNBE, 2016, 41). However, once again there are no compulsory goals set.

Writing [Finland]

In Finnish pre-schools writing skills are not emphasised as much or practised in quite the same way as in England. Therefore, I have combined pencil grip and use of scissors as examples of fine motor skills. Though 12 English teachers mentioned writing skills as central, only 2 Finnish teachers did. One of the reasons for this low percentage could be that actual cursive handwriting is not practised by pre-schoolers.

> **"***Pysyy sakset ja kynät kädessä."* – IIda –
>
> *"Can use scissors and pens."*
>
> *"Ja se kynäote."* – Katri –
>
> *"And that pencil grip."*

Finnish six-year-old children begin with producing capital letters which are easier to form. The curriculum states that: “Children are guided to use an appropriate pencil grip and computer keyboard skills” (FNBE, 2016, 44-45).

Maths [Finland]

The FNBE (2016, 48) states the children should experience: “The joy of invention and learning…in different phases of their mathematical thinking.” The pre-school year should provide: “Opportunities for developing children’s understanding of the concept of numbers, change and time, as well as plane and space and measurement skills” (FNBE, 2016, 48). The Finnish teachers pointed out that children should know numbers between 1-20, and one, Elisa even up to 30. Furthermore, time is taught to the hour and the half hour and some concepts of money are dealt with by the end of the term.

> “*Kymmeneen asti ois hyvä tietenki olla ne numerot hallussa.”* – Heidi –
>
> *“It would be a good thing to know those numbers up to ten.”*
>
> *“No toivotaan esimerkiksi, että osaisi luetella kahteenkymmeneen tai peräti 30:eenkin, mutta kaikki ei osaa.*”– Elisa –
>
> *“Well, we hope, for example, they would know how to count up to twenty or maybe even 30, but they can’t all do it.”*
>
> *“Käydään kelloa läpi. Me käydään siis puoli tuntia ja tasatuntia.”* – Carita –
>
> *“We are learning the clock. We teach half hour and hour.”*
>
> *“Määrän ja luvun niinku vastaavuus. Kyllä ykkösestä 10 pitää niinku eskarivuonna jo osata ja ymmärtää.*” – Iida –
>
> *“The numbers and like what they represent. Certainly, they should already know and understand these things in pre-school.”*

Maths and its different components are taught using illustrative and collaborative methods. Children are encouraged to develop their mathematical skills through functional approaches, play and the use of different senses in various learning environments (FNBE, 2016, 49).

The six-year-old children’s curriculum requirements are implemented via playful activities. Play and other approaches are seen as characteristic for children’s learning and functioning and are therefore the basis for their instruction and activities (FNBE, 2016, 39).

“Et kun leikin ja pelien avullakin on tehty paljon niinku ihan omia juttuja tikkupelejä ja kaikkia tämmösiä niin...leikkimällä niinkun niitäkin saa [matemaattisia taitoja].” – Ursua –

“So, with the help of play and games, like stick games and all that kind of thing...playing they get those [maths skills].”

Finnish teachers viewed the joy of learning as incredibly important. According to FNBE (2016, 20) children have the right to learn by playing and to experience the joy related to learning.

“*Jaaa...oppimisen ilo on minun mielestä se erittäin tärkeä asia.”* – Elisa –

“Yeah...the joy of learning is to me that very important thing.”

“Sitte on paljon pelattu ja leikitty. Pelattu lautapelejä ja Eka-pelejä. Kaikkee ...missä tommonen kirjain ja numero tuntemus lisääntyy ja se että, niistä lapsista on kiva tehä sitä. Että se on niille mielekästä, mielekäs tapa oppia. Ja sitten ne oppii siinä ihan väistämättä.” – Veera –

“And then we have played a lot and played with games. Played board games and pre-school-games. All...that kind of stuff where the awareness of letters and numbers increases, and the fact that those kids love to do it. That it is a meaningful for them, meaningful way for them to learn. And then they will inevitably learn.”

In the following examples teachers describe their maths approach to help the children through verbal modelling via playful instructions:

“Lukujonoja, laskemista ja vaikka taaksekkipäin jos lähetetään avaruusrakettia ilmaan, niin sitte lasketaankin että, lähtölaukaus lähtee kymmenen, yheksän, kaheksan ja näin. Ne [taidot] tullee siinä leikissä...” – Veera –

“Number lines, counting, and counting backwards, if a rocket is sent up into space, then we count, the launching count: ten, nine, eight and so. These [skills] are learned in that game...”

“Sitten ne taidot harjaantuu ko me ollaan leikitty kauppaleikkiä. Ja se raha on jääny kiinnostamaan.” – Veera –

“Then those skills are practiced when we’ve been playing shop game. And that money has started to interest them.”

As much as possible curriculum activities are practised in everyday situations. The FNBE (2016, 49) states that: “Children are encouraged to consider and describe their mathematical observations in various daily situations.” There is to

be no rush or forced atmosphere for children to learn. Finnish curriculum (FNBE, 2016, 39) emphasises that: “Every child gets an opportunity to learn and work at his or her own pace.” Elisa referred her views to Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development theory.

> *“Ja jokainen omalla... lähikehitys vyöhykeellä taas mennään eteenpäin. Että mihin asti toivotaan ja pyritään, että pääsisivät oppimaan, mutta ei kaikki opi. Eikä oo pakko oppia.”* – Elisa –
>
> *“And everyone is moving forward within their own...proximal development zone. So that whatever perimeter is hoped for and strived for will be learned, but not everyone will learn. And you don't have to learn.”*

As stated previously, there are no *hard* curriculum requirements. According to Finnish pre-school curriculum learning environments “...shall also provide opportunities for playing and working in a peaceful and unhurried atmosphere” (FNBE, 2016, 31).

> “*...jos ei herää kiinnostus siihen lukemiseen vielä. Niin sitten... se tulee varmasti myöhemmin, se tulee viimestään sitten koululla. Ja koulussa on kuitenki eka ja toka luokka mistä saa vielä ihan rauhassa sitä [lukemista] harjotella.”* – Elisa –
>
> *“If there's no interest in reading yet. Well then...it will most certainly come later, at the latest, at school. In school, in the first and second grade, you can still practice it [reading] in an unhurried way.”*

However, if the children are willing to learn and showing interest, this is then respected and encouraged. According to curriculum: “Opportunities for experimenting and acting independently are also provided for children” (FNBE, 2016, 36).

> *”Ja sitte jos joku haluaa tietää enempi ja tutkia sitä niin, sitte siellä on mahdollisuus. On mahdollisuus tehä niitä ja puhua ja jutella kavereitten kans.”* – Veera –
>
> *“And then if somebody wants to know more and explore that, then there’s the opportunity. The opportunity to do those things and talk and chat with friends.”*

In pre-primary education Finnish teachers are free to set up small groups and arrange specific activities according to the children’s interest. The FNBE (2016,

45) states that: “Children are encouraged to study and read different kinds of texts as *permitted by their skills* and to explain and express what they have heard or read about in different ways.” Teachers felt that the child’s own interest reinforces their skills.

> *“No useinhan se kiinnostus sitten lisää sitä että, sit sitä taitoakin tulee kyllä, että oppii nopeempaa lukeen ja näin. Jos haluaa tehä lisätehtäviä niin niitä saa. Että...mulla on täsä se...lisätehtävä ryhmä. Ja se on ihan vapaaehtosta lapsilla osallistua siihen. Ja sen he saa koska tahansa lopettaa siihen osallistumisen. Ja siinä on justiinsa sitte näitä mitä lapset on ite toivonu että, on kielellisiä ja matemaattisia tehtäviä.”* – Riitta –
>
> *“Well, very often an interest then intensifies their skills. For example, that you learn to read faster and so on. If you want to do extra tasks you can get them. Therefore...I have this...extra task group. And it's entirely voluntary for children to participate in it. And they can stop taking part it at any time. And the activities are what these children wished for: linguistic and mathematical tasks.”*

Thus, Finnish pre-school provides options for children who are enthusiastic and ready to learn more. Teachers are allowed to arrange these opportunities according to children's interests. The child’s participation is voluntary, and children are able to ask questions and explore through different methods and use of their imagination is encouraged (FNBE, 2016, 46).

Good Self-Image, Confidence and Coping [Finland]

Most of the Finnish teachers felt that during the pre-school year children should develop a strong self-image, confidence and coping skills before they start year one. “Pre-primary education ensures that each child gains experiences of success in learning and as a group member. This supports a positive self-image in children” (FNBE, 2016, 59). 12 Finnish teachers out of 20 also mentioned that their pedagogical aim is to empower children to believe that they are good learners. Should there be difficulties with their learning later on, they have developed a coping mechanism and are confident enough to think: *“Sure, I'm gonna make it in school.”* – Senja –

> *“Mikä mun mielestä on kaikista tärkein kuitenkin se, että lapsella ois semmonen hyvä positiivinen itsetunto niinku oppijana. Lapsella on melkein taivas kattona sille oppimiselle koulussa kun hän luottaa itseensä.*” – Minna –

"I think most important of all is that a child have a good and positive self- image as a learner. Just about the sky is the limit to what a child can learn at school when he or she has self-confidence."

"Ja toivois tietenkin, että jokkainen saa semmosen tunteen, että: Mää opin asioita, että...musta tullee semmonen oppivainen." – Leena –

"And, of course, you'd like every one of them to get the feeling that: I am learning things...I'm gonna be somebody who learns."

A child's own motivation and enthusiasm was deemed important. Finnish teachers felt that the children need to feel content and have a desire to learn new things, therefore this will help them to later maintain their academic achievement.

"Että ne vois siirtyä sinne kouluun että, niillä olis ne riittävät tiedot ja taidot että, ne myös sitten pärjää siellä koulussa. Että, me saatas lapsessa semmonen into herään, että se oppiminen on niinkun kiva asia ja koulu on kiva asia. Ja sitten se, että olis semmonen hyvä itsetunto että, lapsi tietää että, mulla on riittävät tiedot ja taidot et mä tulen pärjäämään. Ja mä tulen varmasti oppimaan paljon uutta." – Senja –

"That when they move on to school, that they would have enough knowledge and skills that they would then be able to get by in school. That we'd woken up such an enthusiasm that learning is fun, and school is fun. And then also, having good self-esteem, that the child knows that he or she has enough knowledge and skills. I'm going to make it and I'm sure I'll learn a lot of new things."

Finnish teachers emphasised the importance of the children's good self-image, confidence and coping. The key issues were: an enthusiastic attitude and self-confidence.

Learning-to-Learn [Finland]

Finally, a quarter of the Finnish teacher's mentioned children's learning-to-learn skills. The approach in Finland is that: everyone has the right to learn in their own way and therefore teachers should support children's individual learning styles. Play facilitates learning and therefore aids in children's construction of the world. Play is offered in its different forms and is central to Finnish pre-primary education. The curriculum (FNBE, 2016, 36) states that: "Experiential and functional working methods provide experiences and strengthen children's motivation to learn."

“Löydetään ne tavat sitte...mikä on lapsen oma tapa oppia. Niitä sitte tuetaan ja sitten sitä kautta voidaan sitte laajentaa sitte, sitä oppimista...että millä tavalla voi oppia asioita.” – Elisa –

“Finding those practices…that are the child's own way of learning. Then support them, and so then it can then like broaden that learning…about what ways you can learn.”

“Ja sitte ehkä tärkeimpänä mun mielestä kumminkin niinku lapsen osalta ois ne oppimaan oppimistavotteet...Hän löytää ne omat tavat oppia. Ku kaikki ollaan yksilöitä.” – Pauliina –

“And then maybe, most importantly, I think, for the child would be how he learns to learn…He finds his own ways to learn. Because everyone is different.”

Quarter of the Finnish teachers emphasised how important it is for a child to understand how he or she learns. The Finnish teachers’ role is to awaken the children’s interest in various learning styles. Finland’s pre-school curriculum states that versatile learning environments support…children’s learning-to-learn skills (FNBE, 2016, 31).

“Ja sitte, että tulee se semmonen...oppii oppimaan.” – Iida –

“And then occur such a thing as…learning to learn.”

“Niitten oppimaan oppimisien taidot, niin nehän on niinkun se mitä meidän pitäisi...oppia tässä.” – Birgitta –

“Their learning to learn skills, those are like what we should...learn here.”

Teachers stated that every child should discover their individual way of learning, when a child realises his learning capabilities, then there is obstacle to acquiring an education and employing education to one's own advantage.

“*Mutta, sitten ne jokka laskee niin ne laskee vaikka sataan. Kun ne on sen oivaltanu sen jutun.”* – Veera –

“But then those who know how to count, they count to a hundred. When they have figured the thing out.”

Finnish pre-school employs a variety of pedagogical approaches. Teachers are in favour of supporting various learning styles. To enhance these, peer learning, the learning enthusiasm of peers, and having fun were all regarded as important. Seeing other children enjoying their learning was judged to be ‘contagious’ and

helping to arouse a desire to learn, especially if the child was lacking in motivation and interest.

> "*Hirveesti riippuu siitä lapsen omasta mielenkiinnosta."* – Riitta –
>
> *"It just tremendously depends on the child's own interest."*
>
> *"Ja sitte tulee semmosta vertaisoppimista sitte ku joku on innostunut jostakin asiasta. Niin sitten se tarttuu niin että, toi osaa ton, määki haluan oppia. Ja paljon tapahtuu sitä oppimista. Mä uskon siihen vertaisoppimisen. Ne oppii hirveesti toisiltaan."* – Veera –
>
> *"And then peer learning occurs. Someone is excited about something, it catches on, if that guy knows how to do that, I want to learn too. And then a lot of learning takes place. I believe in peer learning. They learn a great deal from each other."*
>
> *"Et ryhmäydytään...ja rupee kiinnostumaan asioista ja yhdessä tehdään ja se on semmosta hauskaa yhdessä tekemistä. Etsitään yhdessä tätä tietoa sekä toisten lasten että, aikuisten kanssa. Ja että se on niinku kivaa. Ei tietenkään kaikki toiminta aina voi olla kivaa. Mutta että pyritään kuitenkin siihen että toiminnallisuuden kautta...niinku tehtäis niitä asioita."* – Venla –
>
> *"Get in a group...start to get interested and do together and it's fun to do those things together. Looking for information together, as well with other children and adults. And that is so fun. Of course, not all activities can always be fun. But learning through doing...like just doing those things."*

These findings suggest that because pedagogy employs a variety of approaches and learning styles one could expect that learning that appeals to all individuals is provided. Learning is to be fun most of the time; corresponding to and supportive of children's interest's inclusive of their relationships with peers.

In conclusion, most of the Finnish teachers felt that pre-school enhanced social skills in the course of the year. The desired skills included: the child's ability to co-operate with all others, the ability to look after his or her belongings, interpersonal and listening skills, self-regulation, the ability to follow instructions, the capability of settling disputes and making friends. The Finnish pre-school curriculum develops academic skills in a more embedded and situated, child centred and engaging way. Children are perceived as individuals and supported in their own learning styles. More than half of the Finnish teachers believed that the child's own motivation and enthusiasm contributes to their learning. To help each child to find this enthusiasm for lifelong learning the teachers support was deemed instrumental in arousing children's interest in employing a variety of operational

approaches towards learning. The Finnish teachers' goals appeared to be focused on producing children who are content and happy with their learning and are able to develop lifelong learning-to-learn skills. Children's ability to know how to learn was seen to support later academic achievement. Children's self-image, confidence and coping skills were to be reinforced and valued as an important reservoir for creating lifelong learners.

The third question will explore the participants thoughts pertaining to their current group of children and these children's readiness to move onto Year 3 in England and Year 1 in Finland.

Table 17. *What Are Your Thoughts about Your Current Group of Students and Their Readiness to Move to Year 3 in England / Year 1 in Finland?*

Readiness for the Year 3		**Readiness for the Year 1**	
Category of Response	English Teachers (N=17) f	**Category of Response**	Finnish Teachers (N=20) f
All children ready 100%	1	All children ready 100%	15
Most children ready 99%-60%	14	Most children ready 99%-60%	5
Most children not ready >59%	2	Most children not ready >59%	0

Table 17 summarises teachers' understandings and thoughts about their current group of students and their readiness for transferring to Year 3 in England and to Year 1 in Finland. Both participant group's answers are divided under three themes: a) all children are ready (100%), b) most children are ready (99-60%) and c) most children are not ready (>59%).

This analyse will begin with English teacher responses pertaining to their current group of students and their readiness for Year 3.

A single English teacher responded that all of the children in her class are ready to move onto Year 3.

> *"I think they do, yeah. I think they are…all in all, they are ready. And the curriculum with its changes has hopefully prepared them better...with their maths and their literacy. So, they can go up and feel confident."* – Diana –

Diana job shares her teaching position with Claire. Claire did not agree that the same class she is teaching is ready for their transition to Year 3.

> *"Some of them are. Some of them, I mean, some of them…emotionally are still…they could do with staying another year…and academically. They move up. They're not ready but they got to, you know, carry on and carry on. But…ermmm…no, they're not ready. And in an ideal world, they would have stayed in Reception longer."* – Claire –

These two interview responses reveal differing opinions between and among teachers and their judgements on whether the children are, in fact, ready for the next year.

Majority of the English teachers reasoned that *most of the children in their current group are ready*.

> *"I'd say majority are ready to move up to Year 3. But the hmmm…the lower ability ones…no. Because they're still working some Year 1…hmmm…work."* – Lea –
>
> *"I think most of them ready to move up to Year 3."* – Allison –

Beth, who has worked as a teacher over 20 years stated that there has *always* been 20-25% children who are not ready for school. Every child's development is individual, and this can possibly impact on his or her learning.

> *"I think most of them are ready…I mean, I have been teaching probably 26 years now. Always kept about 70-75% new class that are ready and then other 20-25% that aren't…that never changes, no matter what…the government says you have to teach. You <u>always</u> got those children, cause that's just how the world is. That for some children it takes them a little bit longer time. That's just life."* – Beth –

Helen stated the same percentages (25%) for children who are not ready for transferring to Year 3.

> *"I still have a handful of children that…I think need more Year 2…input. They probably are not really ready for Year 3. But they're gonna go to Year 3 anyway. Ermmm…yeah, the majority, probably about 75% I would think, are ready, for Year 3. But probably 25%…maturity wise, not ready."* – Helen –

Teachers listed the reasons why children are not ready to move up to year 3. The most mentioned were children's maturity, low self-esteem, not able to concentrate and socio-emotional difficulties. Especially social-emotional skills are judged important children's later success in school (Scott-Little et al., 2006, 164; Hudson and Jacques, 2014, 37). Blair (2002, 121) also concluded that the best educational programs focus on "social and emotional competence" rather than narrow academics.

> *"Although, I have children in the class…they've…very low self-esteem, because they know they're not achieving, what the others are achieving. And I'd say they are not ready for Year 3. They're not ready for*

sitting…for the majority of the day. And just, just working really. They're finding it much harder." – Irene –

"...we do have some children with social-emotional difficulties, who will find the transition difficult. And…so, we always have our worries about certain children, whether they will cope emotionally. And whether they will cope academically. Some will be ready…some will find that year group hard." – Penny –

The English teachers recognised the lack of children's basic school readiness skills, e.g. social-emotional and concentration skills. Furthermore, the teachers were worried about the children's coping mechanism.

"I'm aware of what I do, you now, ermmm… I'm trying not to push them too much. I'm trying to give them the opportunities to do things that they enjoy, and they are good at. So, they are coping with the activities. But they're very aware that they're with the younger children. That, that again knocks their confidence. So…it's very hard." – Irene –

English teachers' statements unlock further questions about whether the majority of the children are just *coping* with the high academic demands, and a consideration of whether or not simply "coping" should be sufficient.

2 out of 17 English teachers felt that most (>59%) of the children in their class are *not ready*.

"I would say… sort of half… maybe half of the Year 2's that I have are ready, for Year, ready for Key Stage 2. The other half…would really benefit from more time to take things in, more time to learn a bit more slowly." – Nicole –

"This year as an overall class, they're very immature. Armm…they're still very dependent on people, I don't think they are ready for Year 3. They could do with another year, I think. But…you can't have it." – Melissa –

These responses were presented by Nicole and Melissa with modest teaching experience. However, these statements are rather worrying. Younger teachers appear to recognise a problem that they are powerless to address. As mentioned in the literature review, Pretti-Frontczak, et al. (2016, 50) pointed out that the educational policies and practices should avoid expecting all children to be developmentally the same and be able to perform the same skills at the same age.

8 out of 17 English teachers mentioned specifically the learning gap between children.

> *"They arrived in Year 2 not ready. They left Reception not ready. And…those gaps…we've worked really hard to plug them. But they're not just ready for them…but I don't think they will ever fully catch up, because not everybody…can."* – Penny –

> *"Some they've got some gaps with Year 1 knowledge and some gaps with Year 2 knowledge. Ermmm…spelling and phonics and understanding of spelling patterns is…has come out as being a big issue. Ermmm…so, for them…that's holding them back in reading and writing…I think some of them…there's always going to be that gap, I think, sadly, but yeah."* – Helen –

As stated in the literature review, English teachers' responses correlated with the research studies which have found out that, the children who enter school behind in their learning will not normally fully catch up (Duncan and Magnuson, 2005; Lamy, 2013, 32; Burchinal, 2018). Furthermore, Janus and Offord (2007, 1-2) suggested that the learning gaps at a younger age seem to increase over the years rather than decline. Most of the English teachers felt that the children are unable to catch up with education targets later on. One of the reasons teachers thought this was happening was because the children arrive at Year 2 already behind. Another reason was that curriculum targets have grown more demanding and therefore possibly are creating even bigger gaps when moving to Year 3.

The teachers seemed to feel that some skills gaps could be narrowed by taking children's individual readiness skills better into consideration in place of chronological age and allowing flexible school enrolment. They commented that currently curriculum subjects and national testing in Year 2 are consuming the available time and possibly preventing filling these gaps.

> *"But you got to fill the gap somewhere. See you got to trying fill them gaps. Whilst teaching other stuff as well. So…it's, I think, some of them are going to struggle. Definitely. Like a lot of my interventions this year I've been focusing on the SAT's. And getting through the SAT's. So, hopefully without SAT's next year, they might have more time to their intervention to be more…based on the lower ones, hopefully."* – Allison –

The schools are trying to fill children's learning gaps with extra help and support and therefore getting them ready for Year 3.

> *"We put in a whole half term's worth of support. Because it's important. We don't want children to…suffer as the result of the change [curriculum]. Because it's a big change for our children. We do it very closely with our…*

Junior School…to identify those children. Our learning mentor takes some children who she thinks will, we think, will might struggle and be frightened or worried. They have extra things so…we try and minimise as much as we can." – Penny –

"But they've already been addressed. So, it might be that the teachers themselves have to do some over learning with that child. It might be that the parent can do something at home. It might be that intervention is actually already put in place for them. So, it really has kind of…ermmm…they all have personalised targets to take with them into the next class." – Olivia –

Teachers worried about how the children are to manage the next year despite the targeted support available.

"So… they'd had a lot of input into trying to fill those gaps and support them. And other things have been put into place. But yeah, there is a concern that some of these children are still…on B-scale…so…or are around just using their phonic are going into Year 3." – Ruth –

Children's lack of academic or maturity skills were a special concern. When questioned specifically about their thoughts on the possibility of closing the educational gap, they replied:

"I think they just continue to not be ready…and continue trying to put things in place so that they can catch up and learn things. But it doesn't always work because there isn't enough time for the child to actually take in what is going on. You can't teach them a higher skill before we got the lower ones…so they do struggle." – Nicole –

"Well, they're already starting…they're already in trouble, aren't they? They're already starting from the place where…I mean, they must feel…frustrated and they must, you know, it must be awful. Because …how can they…they're never gonna catch up. And that must be a horrible place to be. And all the intervention work, that's great and it does help. But the, the children know that, you know, that… they're not, they should be doing this and not that. It, it, it, it, it's sad, I think it's sad for them." – Claire –

The final point revealed in the interview responses is that teachers did not expect that the children will eventually catch up with their education. The children who are 'the lower level 'students will stop trying and possibly not care about their schooling any longer.

> *"You don't strive and then never get where you should be. That makes you fed up and frustrated. I could understand why, you know, children just don't…they get turned off from education. Because…because in the sense, we are failing them. And we are not allowing them to develop at their own potential. All this, you know, Every Child Matters, and I know it's not a buzz word anymore, but all of that. They don't. They don't in reality."* – Claire –

> *"They are quite detached, a lot of them from learning. They'd don't, there's something that they have to do, rather than they want to do it. Armmm…I think that's one of the big things that we've been talking about quite recently in school, is how to make them want to…learn. But…if you're not doing something that they're interested in they're not gonna…want to learn it as much. So, they just become very…passive. So, if they're lost interest and they're six and seven, there's something gone really wrong somewhere because, it's so easy to get excited about stuff."* – Melissa –

These responses were presented by a mixture of teachers across all levels of experience. Furthermore, Allison's statement below, calls attention to the question of why these children do not seem to care much whether they are learning or not. Possible factors could be of course children's socioeconomic background, parenting, school environment and individual development among other issues.

> *"I mean, obviously they do know that…whatever table you put them at, children always know that they're the lowest, so whether you tell them or not. But they aren't particularly bothered about it. They're not. Because a lot of them…could be a lot better if they chose to listen. And the effort sometimes is what lets them down. So, if they really wanted to try…they probably could do. So, it's partly their effort as well."* – Allison –

This statement was made by Allison who had 1-2 years of teaching experience.

As brought forth in the literature review, when students experience happiness in their educational context, they are more likely to have higher levels of academic engagement, achievement and personal fulfilment (Datu et al., 2017, 29; Heffner and Antaramian, 2016, 1695; King, et al, 2015, 64; Lewis, et al., 2009, 397). As illustrated above, some children appear already to be disengaged, giving up on their education.

Worries, despondency, and to some extent the teachers' frustration were also expressed by Claire and Irene with significant work experience.

"It's not about fun and joy and exploring and learning. It's about…getting through these tests and…teachers are grumpy if they're not getting there, you know." – Claire –

"It makes me really sad, cause you don't come into teaching to…to do that to children, really. So yeah, it makes me sad." – Irene –

In conclusion, this question probed teachers' thoughts about their current student's readiness for moving to year 3. Most of the English teachers mentioned that *all* children are not really ready to move onto the next year. It seemed that a few children are already behind and indeed were already behind entering Year 2. Though schools have arranged extra support for these children, curriculum subjects and national testing are making demands on available time and possibly preventing filling in learning gaps. Furthermore, teachers commented that some children need more time to develop and yet it is not possible to delay their school entry.

Following is an analysis of the Finnish teachers' responses on their current group of students and their readiness for Year 1.

15 out of 20 Finnish teachers believed that *all children are ready* in their current group. Teachers did harbour doubts about children's ability to succeed the next year. The teachers expressed the opinions that the children are school ready.

"Tää eskarivuosi kasvattaa hirveesti ja vielä sitte se kesäki auttaa, että tulee se semmonen koululaisen tsemppi." – Ursula –

"This pre-school school year contributes to their growth just enormously, and then comes the summer which also helps, so comes a kind of "school-ready" feeling in the kid."

"Tässä on ainaki valtava kehitys tapahtunu niinku tän vuoden aikana... jokainen lapsi on mennyt eteenpäin...Monet menee niin kun sillä omalla tahdillansa. Mutta kaikista voi sanoa et eteenpäin on menty ja koulua kohti." – Senja –

"There has been a tremendous development during this year...every child has moved on...Many move on at their own pace. But all in all, you can say they've moved ahead towards school."

The Finnish teachers considered that the schools are ready for the children's differences in their entry level skills.

> *“Koulu on valmis ottaan kaikenlaisia niinkun oppijoita vastaan...sitä kehitystä tapahtuu niin paljon siinä kuuden ja kaheksan ikävuoden välillä lapsilla.”* – Ulla –
>
> *“The school is ready to take in all kinds of learners...children’s development is so great between the ages of six and eight.”*

The Finnish teachers’ answers reflect the interactionist views of Meisels (1998, 3) dealt with in the literature review; the interactionist perspective recognising what children already know, the school’s job being to adapt practices to children’s different strengths and needs (Meisels, 1998, 3) with children’s readiness seen as a bidirectional concept (Meisels, 1998, 49).

The remaining quarter of the Finnish teachers felt that *most children are ready*. These answers were presented by teachers with higher teaching experience and their worries did not relate primarily to the academic skills [e.g. reading or writing] but rather to the child’s ability to regulate their social skills, in other words, behaviour. This concern was mostly centred on boys been born later and were thus younger.

> *“Niin nyt mää en ottas tähän näitä...laskis sitä pärjäilemistä näissä matematiikan enkä äidinkielen taidoissa, kun mää nyt kyllä annan hirveen ison painon tänne sosiaaliselle puolelle. Tähän niinkun...sosiaaliselle käyttäytymiselle ja sosiaalisille suhteille.’”* – Veera –
>
> *“So here, I wouldn’t take these kind of things...wouldn't count in these maths and language skills, instead I give lots of weight to the social side. To this kind of...social behaviour and social relationships.”*
>
> *“Kyllhän ne saa sitten ne kiinni mutta että, et nyt tuntuu, että on niinku hirveen lapsellisia vielä.”* – Ursula –
>
> *“Yeah, they'll catch up with the rest, but now it feels like they're so really childish still.”*

These comments are consistent with those of Usakli and Ekici (2018, 72) who stated that developmentally appropriate practice should take into account respectively of social relationships with peers…rather than highlighting academic content (Scott-Little et al., 2006, 164).

Since the children have had a longer time to enjoy play based curriculum without academic targets there has been more time to reflect on the children’s school

readiness during the pre-school year and detect if there is need for special learning support before moving on to Year 1.

> "...*Että kuka on kehittyny sen vuoden aikana ja voiko ajatella, että tuota se vähän kurois sitte kiinni. Jos joku lapsi on vaan niinku niin leikkiväinen että, sitä ei vain yksinkertasesti niinkun oo vielä...ei ole heränny semmonen kiinnostus siihen [kouluun].”* – Veera –
>
> *“…Taking a look at who's been developing during the year and can we think that, maybe he'll be able to catch up. If a child is just so into play and simply hasn't woke up any interest in that [school].”*

Teachers felt that the system works. Usually the group of pre-schoolers remain together, and this was seen as supporting their learning further because of steady friendships.

> *“Joo, kyllä mää koen periaatteessa et ne menee sinne [perusopetukseen] koska, sitten monella se saattaa olla vaan se ensimmäinen vuosi et ne tarttee sinne erityisen tuen. Et ne kasvaa siinä kiinni. Tai sitten...kakkosella ne rupee oleen jo aika niinku samois tasoissa muitten kanssa. Että ku tää on niin suuri tää vaihteluki. Kun mä mietin meiänkin ryhmää et sit meillä saattaa toinen lapsi syntynyt tammikuussa ja toinen joulukuussa. Niin siinä on niinku melkein vuosi ikäeroa että. Et se on vielä niin huima tässä vaiheessa. Mut sit kun ne kasvaa niin sit se niinkun se ero pienenee koko ajan.”* – Oona –
>
> *“Yeah, in principle, I feel they'll go there [mainstream education] because, then for many, it might just be like that first year that they'll need that special support there. They'll grow into it. Or then...the second year they start to be pretty much on the same level with the others. The variation is so big when I think of our group that we have one child born in January and another in December. So, it's almost a year's difference in age. Really huge at this stage. But then as they grow, the difference gets smaller and smaller all the time.”*

Special support is seen as temporary in Finnish mainstream schools since teachers expect that children normally are able to catch up their mates at a later stage. The teachers' responses are in line with the OECD's (2010a, 5) statement in reference to Finland that: "No other country has so little variation in outcomes between schools, and the gap within schools between the top and bottom-achieving students is modest as well." As stated by Meisels (1998, 9), "Readiness is not an end in itself; it is the beginning of an active teaching and learning engagement."

To sum up the results of the tenth interview question, I explored teachers' understandings and thoughts about their current group of students and their readiness for transferring to Year 3 in England and to Year 1 in Finland. The majority of Finnish respondents felt that all children are ready for transition to the next year. Extra time for maturating the child's holistic growth could be proposed as a factor in the Finnish teachers' assertiveness and trust that the children are genuinely ready. Thus, substantiating the importance of an unhurried play-based childhood curriculum.

A quarter of the Finnish teachers were concerned as to how some younger children (especially boys) will succeed in their upcoming year. These experienced teachers were not concerned about academic challenges but more generally about their maturity, that is to say, behaviour. Most of the children in Finland continue into mainstream education despite some possible special learning needs. Usually, with the right level of support available, the children are able to catch up with their classmates later on.

The fourth interview question sought to learn how the current National Curriculum in England and Pre-primary Curriculum in Finland support teachers' pedagogy.

Table 18. *How Does the Current National Curriculum / Pre-primary Curriculum Support Your Teaching?*

The support from the curriculum		**The support from the curriculum**	
Category of Response	English Teachers (N=17) f	**Category of Response**	Finnish Teachers (N=20) f
Good support	2	Very good support	16
Supports to extent	11	N/A	
Not supporting	4	Freedom to teach	14
Not age appropriate	12	Age appropriate	16
Children not understanding or forgetting their learning	7	N/A	

Table 18 highlights teachers' understandings and feelings as to how the current National Curriculum in England and Pre-Primary Core Curriculum in Finland support their teaching.

As can be observed from Table 18, in England, views on support from the National Curriculum ranged from a) good, to b) medium and c) no support. Furthermore, 12 English teachers out of 17 were worried about d): The National Curriculum's age appropriateness. 7 English teachers out of 17 expressed strong scepticism on the children's general understanding or remembering of the required level of the subjects.

In Finland, 16 teachers out of 20 were very happy with the core curriculum. On the whole, teachers felt that a) the pre-school curriculum gives them a very good support. Furthermore, 14 teachers out of 20 felt that they are allowed autonomy in the classroom, and that b) curriculum gives them personal freedom to teach. Furthermore, 16 teachers out of 20 expressed the curriculum supporting children's age-related expectations. These responses were widely acknowledged regardless of teachers' teaching experience.

Firstly, an analysis of the English teachers' understandings of feelings on their current National Curriculum will be presented.

Olivia and Diana, both teachers with over 10 years of teaching experience, stated that the National curriculum supports their teaching well.

"I think the new National Curriculum supports it. It means that we are not racing through everything. I think it does support what we're doing…I think it gives…gives you much kind of wider playing field." – Olivia –

"Ermmm…in terms of...helping the children move on. I think, it does. And it means we can really concentrate on making them fully understand and broaden their understanding…yeah, there's still areas in the new curriculum that need tweaking and, but I don't think they've quite got it right, but…I think it is better." – Diana –

These two teachers saw the curriculum securing specifically the Year 2 targets and deepening children's understanding of their subjects. It was also mentioned that they are able to spend more time with subjects before moving on.

11 teachers out of 17 stated that the National Curriculum supports them only up to a certain extent. These responses were widely acknowledged regardless of teachers' teaching experience. The participants seemed confused and they were not sure if the curriculum has actually given them the right tools for teaching. Noticeably, the teachers used a range of negative descriptive words in connection with the curriculum: prescriptive, too formal, technical and hard.

"Lots of different things, that they're expecting this, then another day they're expecting something else. So, yeah it can be quite confusing." – Emma –

"Well it does to…it does to a certain extent. Because you been hmm…told what to teach." – Lea –

"I think, it's very…sort of technical based." – Grace –

"So…it is hard, and it'll take time…I think, for teachers to get, to get their heads around the new expectations." – Fiona –

Among the teachers, there was an understanding of what lies behind the recent current curriculum changes. However, according to the teachers the curriculum has become more demanding and possibly ignores children's developmental levels.

"I can see that, you know, there is a need for National Curriculum. And we should all be working towards basic skills and stuff. But I just think it's too prescriptive and it's too formal. And it's not always age appropriate. I'd say yeah it's too…they ought to trust us a little bit more." – Claire –

"I think I can understand why what the government is trying to do. Cause they're trying to raise attainment. I just think they'd gone about it slightly

wrong way. I can see like they're trying to do it for the right reasons. To try and get education higher but…they seem to forget that they're children…and…that children need to play that's…you know that's what they do. The way they've done the curriculum now, it's very…you need to do this, this, this. It's very specific. You can't, sort of…it's difficult to make it…more fun." – Melissa –

It seemed that teachers were trying to reassure themselves and just hoping things will work out in the end. However, the remaining four of English teachers expressed discontent and stated that the curriculum does not support them at all. This handful of teachers were very frank, and they also articulated and explained why.

T: So, how does the current National Curriculum support your teaching?

Beth: "*It's stifling."*

T: It's…?

Beth: "*It's stifling."*

T: Meaning?

Beth: "*Meaning it's, it's like a straitjacket."*

T: Meaning?

"I ahhh…It means, it means I don't actually fundamentally agree with the things that I have been asked to do this year with the new changes in the National Curriculum. I don't think it helped my teaching at all." – Beth –

"I don't think the National Curriculum supports my teaching. I think it gives me a list of objectives to work towards. And it just feels very prescribed." – Penny –

"Well, I just think, that the curriculum at the moment it's ridiculous." – Allison –

Most of the English teachers were antagonised by the academic targets. Reflecting on the children's chronological age the participants felt that they were possibly wasting time by trying to make children understand the higher learning objectives. Overall, the biggest concern amongst English teachers was the curriculum's suitability for six-year-old children. 12 teachers out of 17 stated that the curriculum is not age appropriate. These responses were widely acknowledged regardless of teachers' teaching experience.

"The age appropriateness is changed completely. A lot of the….a lot of the skills that I'm teaching the children now. I would not have taught them three or four years ago." – Julia –

"Hmmm…but the expectations have risen dramatically, and they are unrealistic in, in my personal opinion. The children aren't, in my opinion, they are not ready, they are not at that level, but that's not taken into consideration. Well there is a lot of different things you can do, but ultimately, I do, I personally believe that we are asking some of them children…to do beyond their maturity. 'You can't just move the goal post and it's gonna work. That's not how they're gonna make the children clever and achieve more." – Lea –

"It's…too much for children. And the things they need to know. It's not age appropriate for them. They need to sort time for play but…you don't have time for play. If you want to get everything covered." – Allison –

"I think they are now asking too much of them at too young an age." – Melissa –

The teachers mentioned that the National Curriculum indicates that all the children should move on at the same time and to the same level. However, this has caused some concerns among the teachers.

"So, the new National Curriculum talks about ermmm…everybody moving through the curriculum at the same pace." – Olivia –

"It's at the moment…children…need to learn certain things by a certain age. Or they're expected to learn certain things by a certain age. And…sometimes that doesn't work for every child. It's much easier for them to be able to go at their own pace. Ermmm…some children, I think, if we're pushing them…ermmm…to achieve faster… then they really can…" – Emma –

As Emma states, there are more children who are able to achieve the targets if they get extra assistance. However, it could be questioned how many of these supports are available, is it beneficial to sacrifice children's play activities and keep continuing to patch up these academic gaps on children's break time? What measures are to be taken just trying to keep all learning together. Olivia lists a range of support in her school.

"We've putting some pre learning for some children. We are putting some over learning for the children, so they may come back in at dinner time. Or they may do some work one to one while ermmm…we've got quiet reading or something happening. Ermmm…we are also then putting the deeper

challenges for extending those that need extending. And ermmm…the explanation side of it. So, we have an alien in every classroom that they have to explain their findings to…and what strategies they used and why they'd chose it. Ermmm…we have ermmm…assessment partners, that they use. So, so lots of different things that we're putting in place to kind of, really deepen their understanding. Ermmm…we have lots of teaching assistants." – Olivia –

Olivia's statement supports the existing research evidence which made note of the "trickledown effect" that occurs when young children are taught more demanding curricula and therefore possibly missing their play opportunities (Bassok et al., 2016, 1; Claessens et al., 2014, 404). Sometimes things do backfire as seven teachers also mentioned that quite often children do not fully understand some of the concepts or after a while, they forget what they have learned.

"I would like them to be securing what they know. Not just be able to pass it for the test and then forget it the next week. And I think sometimes we teach them to be able to do it. Almost like a checklist. And their fully understanding isn't there." – Julia –

"So, it's ok for those children who are ready for it but with…but around 90% of children in my class are not ready for that. And then it means like they're using it incorrectly. And they don't understand how to use question marks or any of this. As soon as that scaffolding is gone, and you come back to it in two weeks' time, in, in assessment. Then no idea. So, we are trying to teach some things before they understand what underlines that idea…and…yes just asking too much of them when they are not ready." – Kelly –

English teachers observed negative effects on children who might not achieve their expected targets. Children who do not achieve might start lacking confidence in their learning. Several teachers – regardless of their teaching experience – stated that by asking too much from children whilst too young can make them feel a failure and cause them to stop trying.

"And I don't think that has the most positive effect on them. And that can't be great for building confidence. Even though we don't say it in the classroom. We do have to report it to the parents." – Julia –

"If they constantly feel like they don't understand things, then…they're not going to be confident in anything, in what they do." – Nicole –

> *"The amount of children who are getting it, and don't get it, is still the same. But you could have a lot more fun while you're at it. And I think we would…the thing is sometimes we turn them off too quickly and too soon and make them a failure too soon. And I think that's really difficult, cause we're judging them then, aren't we? At really early age."* – Beth –
>
> *"Yes, some children we're pushing them to achieve things that they aren't necessarily ready for. They find it hard. Ermmm…and I worry about how that will affect their self-esteem, in the future."* – Emma –

As cited in the literature review, Wallerstedt and Pramling (2012, 5) noted that high academic goals and targets might also propose a challenge to the teachers, thus possibly affecting pedagogy and children's educational experiences (Skilbeck, 2017, 4). The above studies resonate with the English teachers' responses who clearly pointed out their personal dissatisfaction and pressure affecting their teaching choices.

> *"That's just me personally. But sometimes in life, you have to do things even though you don't believe in them yourself and that's quite hard. So, I just jump through certain hoops. But then I feel…I could've done something much better with that time."* – Beth –
>
> *"I qualified in 1995. And you imagine that you're going to be doing really fun things. And the fun things, I still do those fun things, but I do them knowing that it's making everything else harder. I've got more to fit in and…so yeah just really…it's tough. And you feel a bit annoyed sometimes. Bit rebellious as well at other times." (laughing)* – Irene –
>
> *"Ermm…but it doesn't really help you in terms of…it's not particularly inspiring, when you look at what you need to cover. Sometimes you think: But why?' And again, the, the amount of things we have to cover…limit our time. And so, I always feel that we're squeezing."* – Penny –
>
> *"I think it's a bit more limited. I don't think they've got the same…freedom to sort of...follow what they want. It's very specific. And I think…cause it's so specific…people are literally sticking to that. And not…doing the other things that children might want to do. The schools feel a lot of pressure. And you get a lot of pressure."* – Melissa –

All in all, English teachers felt that the National Curriculum supports their teaching to some extent. However, most of the English teachers were concerned about the new higher curriculum targets which they did not deem child appropriate and in conjunction with age-related development. Seven teachers expressed their experience that, if the concepts are made harder and the children do not fully

understanding, then the learners will not retain what they have learned. It was also mentioned that the government has possibly forgotten the actual children and that learning is merely for ticking the boxes; for SAT's and Ofsted. Somewhat startlingly, the participants reported that when a sufficient amount of time is put into helping children who lag behind, this support may of necessity occur during what should be the children's playtime.

Following is analyse of the Finnish participants comments and feelings about the Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (FNBE, 2016).

16 teachers out of 20 felt that the current pre-school curriculum provides the necessary guidance and is designed as a genuine support. The rest of the teachers made no specific comments on this matter possibly because their short experience of teaching.

> *"Hyvä niinkun sellanen...missä on niinku hyvin ne asiat. Kyl mä ainakin niinkun aatellut, että kyl se enemmän just tukee et kun se ei kuitenkaan sillai orjuuta. Uusi esiopetussuunnitelma on tuntunut tukevan esiopetusta hyvin."* – Ursula –
>
> *"It's good…like where those [things] matters are laid out. At least I've thought that it mostly just supports, and you really aren't enslaved by it at all. The new pre-school curriculum seems to be supporting teaching well."*
>
> *"Se toimii ainakin ittelle semmosena niinku hyvänä välineenä että, niinku sai tavallaan käsityksen että, mitä kaikkee tässä pitäis vuoden aikana pitää mielessä ja mitä lasten...tavallaan niinku tulis oppia."* – Senja –
>
> *"It works good at least for me as a good tool, that kind of, gives me a feeling for what kind of things I should be keeping in mind during the year and what the children...should be learning."*
>
> *"Mun mielestä tämä opetussuunnitelma on aivan tosi loistava. Se on aivan ihan mahtavasti tehty, että mää jokaikisen lauseen voisin allekirjoittaa sieltä ihan täysin."* – Elisa –
>
> *"I think this curriculum is really great. It's just so wonderfully done that I could without hesitation sign under every single sentence there."*

As stated in the literature review, Finnish teachers are allowed to adapt the curriculum they teach. The local education authorities in Finland are obligated to develop their own local curricula *based on* the National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education (FNBE, 2016, 10). A small portion, 8 participating teachers out of 20, have been part of such a development team and these teachers felt

specifically happy because they have been able to influence the new pre-primary curriculum locally and personally.

> *“Mää sain olla mukana niinku, kaikki esikouluopettajat, niin tekemästä paikallista osuutta ja se oli niin ku loistava. Ja jokaisella oli oma työryhmä mihin osallistu ja niinku sai keskittyä siihen. Sitte sai olla kuitenki kuulemassa ja sanomassa mielipiteen kaikkiin näihin paikallisiin. Ja pohjalla oli tietenkin tää, opetussuunnitelma. Ja niin, mä pystyn niinku ihan täysin sisäistään, ja ajatteleen aivan samalla tavalla mitä siellä on että, tää niinku tukee ihan täysin...tätä...esiopetuksen opetusta.”* – Elisa –
>
> *“I got to be involved, like all the preschool teachers, preparing the local part and it was really great. And everyone had their own team to attend and that made it possible to focus on it. Then it was made possible to be heard of and give my opinions on these local things. The starting point was the national pre-primary curriculum. And yeah, now I can totally understand it, it is part of me, I think the same way about what is laid out there. This completely supports...this...pre-school teaching.”*

14 Finnish teachers out of 20 commented that the curriculum allows them to teach freely without specific academic targets or constraints and considered that the curriculum supported children’s age-related expectations. The remaining 6 teachers out of 20 responded that the current curriculum supports their teaching, but were not specifically confident in expressing their opinions, possibly due to their short work experience. For example, Senja (teaching experience 1-2 years) was not certain, explaining that she had only worked a short time in preschool:

> *“En oo tehny eskarissa siis.. muuta kun tämmösii niinku lyhyitä sijaisuuksia. Et tää on nyt tämmönen ensimmäinen niinku koko vuosi, minkä mää oon eskarissa.” – Senja –*
>
> *“So, I haven’t really worked in preschool...only like short replacements. This is now my first time, like a whole year, in preschool.”*

Likewise, the remainder of the teachers were unable to expand their answers. Heidi, for example, (teaching experience 1-2 years) stated:

> *“No ne tavotteet just löytyy sieltä [opetussuunnitelma], että emmää sen kummemmin ossaa tähän sanua.” – Heidi –*
>
> *"Well, those goals can be found in there [curriculum], well, I don’t know what more to say about this."*

It appears that the curriculum supports teachers’ knowledge, skills and motivation because it grants them autonomy to formulate and utilise their own personal

strengths in their work. Teachers' beliefs, philosophy and growth as an educator are acknowledged as important.

> *"Et siinä saa opettaja ite niinku ottaa oman persoonansa ja...omat keinonsa käyttöön, että se ei oo niin tarkasti määritelty, että mitä pitää tehdä. Koska me ollaan erilaisia persoonia kaikki, niin, jokainen saa niinko omalla tavallaan tehdä."* – Carita –
>
> *"That it allows the teacher to be like their own personality and...use their own means that it is not so strictly defined what needs to be done. Because we are all different personalities, so everyone gets to apply their own way of working."*
>
> *"Mä saan aika hyvin toteuttaa niinku itteäni sen myötä tietenkin mitä lapsista sitte lähtee."* – Venla –
>
> *"I can make it happen pretty much how I want it, and of course, it's all about the children."*

Because the curriculum gives the flexibility to plan and teach, it ultimately creates important job satisfaction, and therefore it is to be expected that Finnish teachers would remain in their jobs longer. My short questionnaire covered this topic, however there were too few participants in this study to be able to draw reliable conclusions.

English teaching years	***f***	**%**	**Finnish teaching years**	***f***	**%**
3-5yrs	2	12	**3-5yrs**	1	5
6-10yrs	2	12	**6-10yrs**	4	20

Table 18a: *Teachers' Years of Teaching*

These findings lend further support to the contention that the curriculum is there for the teachers. Practitioners are therefore able to apply a wider view on their teaching and pedagogy. The children will continue to learn things according to their own interest and development. This includes assisting different learners and different ways of learning.

> *"No kyllä se tukee. Tää oo uus on mun mielestä siinä mielessä parempi kun miettii et se antaa niinku enemmän tilaa niille niinkun omille ja myös lasten tämmösille mielenkiinnon kohteille ja muulle. Että, vaikka siinä on ne raamit... niin silti se on aika vapaa."* – Venla –
>
> *"Well yes it does lend support. In my opinion, the new one is better when I think of it as it gives more space to choose on your own and also take into consideration children's interests and such. Even though it has those guidelines...it's still pretty free."*

“Toiminnallisuus on ollut oma periaatteeni opetuksessa jo pitkään. Se tukee myös niitä lapsia, joilla on tuettavia osa-alueita ja esim. oppimis- tai keskittymisvaikeuksia. Ryhmän tärkeys vertaistukena ja leikin merkitys oppimisessa näkyy oppimistilanteissa. Monipuoliset materiaalit mahdollistavat myös oppimisen monesta eri näkökulmasta. Myös eri ainealueiden yhdistäminen on ollut minulle ominaista opetuksessa.” – Noora –

“Keep them active has been my principle in teaching for a long time. It also supports children with additional needs, such as learning or concentration difficulties. The importance of the group as peer support and the importance of play in learning can clearly be seen learning situations. Versatile materials also allow learning from many different perspectives. Combining different subject areas has also been a characteristic of my teaching.”

8 teachers out of 20 mentioned specifically phenomenon-based learning.

“Jaa, ilmiömäinen oppiminen? No se on justiin et kun joku lapsi keksii jonkun. Että tarttuu niinku jostakin jutusta kiinni...ja siihen saa sitten ympättyä...kaikenlaista siihen sitte ympärille.” – Venla –

“Yeah, phenomenal learning? Well, indeed it's exactly when a child comes up with something. That he latches onto a thing……and then you can add...all sorts of things to it.”

“Että siinä niinku painottuu tämmönen tutkiminen ja omasta oppimisesta vastuun ottaminen ja...semmonen ilmiöpohjanen oppiminen, et tutkii ilmiöitä. Lapsista tulee sen oman oppimisensa subjekti. Että se ottaa niinku sieltä... niitä, asioita. Ja saa niinku valita niitä kiinnostuksen kohteita ja...ja niistä tulee niitä ideoita että, mitäs tuolla metsäpolulla...?” – Veera –

“The focus is on...exploring and taking responsibility for one's own learning, and...like phenomenon learning, so you study phenomena. Children become the subject of their own learning. That he is able to pick up...those things. And you get to choose those things of interest and...and they come up with the ideas for hey what's on that forest path…?”

Most of the Finnish teacher’s mentioned that the children’s level of development and interests are considered when developing their individual learning plans. The current pre-school curriculum has a strong emphasis on learning through play, including explorative phenomenon-based learning. As mentioned earlier, the emphasis is on the child’s development and their varying ways of learning which are seen as more important than their actual chronological age.

“Lapsen ikä on uudessa esiopetussuunnitelmassa huomioitu hyvin painottamalla leikin osuutta. Se on tuntunut todella mukavalta. Esimerkiksi olen aina pyrkinyt lähteä seuraamaan lasten innostuksen kohteita ja

jatkamaan projekteja eteenpäin ja nivomaan asioita yhteen. Useita voisi kutsua ilmiöoppimiseksi." – Ursula –

"The age of the child is taken well into account in the new pre-school curriculum by emphasising the role of play. This has felt really nice. For example, I have always tried to follow through on the sources of children's enthusiasm and to continue their projects forward and to incorporate all those things together. Many of these could be called phenomena-based learning."

"Oon ilahtunu että, siellä painottuu niin paljon leikin merkitys. Se tulee siellä monessa kohtaan esille, että leikin kautta opitaan ja toimimalla. Että se on niinku semmonen...hyvä asia siellä." – Ulla –

"I'm delighted that there is so much emphasis on play. It comes out in many places, that through play we learn and act. And it's like...a good thing there."

The Finnish curriculum is clearly promoting a playful approach to learning and striving for a child centred approach. It is aimed at creating a good self-esteem and the feeling of success in a child. Furthermore, Finnish teachers mentioned the importance of the child's participation and listening when planning activities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989) declared in Article 31 that child should have an opportunity to participate, make decisions and to be heard. The Finnish curriculum also emphasises that "children participate in the planning of learning modules" (FNBE, 2016, 39).

"Se on niinkun enemmän semmonen niinku lapsilähtösempi. Siinä just kumminki painotetaan sitä niinkun niitä lasten omia kiinnostuksen kohteita. Ja just tämä et se lapsi sais sen niinku kokemuksen siitä, että hän on niinkun tärkeä ja ainutlaatunen ja myös että, just näitä tämmösiä onnistumisen ja itsetunnon...tämmöstä vahvistamista niinku sieläki painotettiin." – Senja –

"It is kind of like more child-centered. Like the emphasis is on the children's interests. And on the point that the child gets the experience of being important and unique and also gets the sense of being successful and self-esteem...it's like these kinds of things are strengthened and emphasised in the curriculum."

"No tietysti se lapsilähtöisyys. Mä pidän, pidän ylipäätänsä siitä että, niin kun lapsista lähtis mahdollisimman paljon ne aiheet. Että...mun mielestä...ehkä liian vähän kumminkin, vieläkin, me kuunnellaan lapsia." – Riitta –

"Well, of course the child-centredness. Overall, I like the idea that, as much as possible, the children start the topics. That...in my opinion...maybe we still don't, listen to the kids enough."

“Siinä [OPS] on mielestäni kauheen ihanasti tää juuri se lapsen yksilöllisyys ja lapsen niinkun se etsiminen ja oppimaan oppiminen sieltä niin kun omaan tutkimisen kautta, tekemisen kautta...niin minusta se tukee hirveen hyvin.” – Birgitta –

“I think that [curriculum] takes into account so very wonderfully exactly this, the individuality of a child and how they discover and learn to learn through their own exploration and doing...I feel it supports it very well.”

Finnish pre-primary education’s goals are determined by the core curriculum (FNBE, 2016, 19), however, as stated before, there are no common goals for the level of knowledge the children should attain. Broad-based planning has made it possible to provide teaching based on children’s individual skills and the possibility to practice their skills at their own level. The ultimate goal is that learning new knowledge and skills will awaken the child’s desire to learn more. Ideally then, each child is given the opportunity to advance on their own level and pursue their own aspirations.

“Vaikka meilläkin on esiopetussuunnitelma ja on niinku tietyt asiat mut meillä ei oo niinku niin niin tarkkaan määritelty ja saa sitä omaa vapautta ja...eri tavoin tehdä asioita. Ja niinkun todella sen leikin avulla oppii ihan hirveesti ja...varsinkin just sitä tärkeintä kavereitten kanssa olemista niin...siinä mielessä musta tuntuu että...se on kyllä hyvä ikä, että saa vielä leikkiä niin pitkään.” – Ursula –

“Even though we do have the pre-school curriculum and there are certain things, but those are not so strictly defined, and it gives that personal freedom and...the possibility to do things differently. And really helps to learn so much and...especially the most important, getting on with friends so...in that sense...it's a good age to be allowed to play for so long.”

“Niin kyllähän me ihan harjoitellaan vaikka jonku numero kahdeksan niinku piirtämistä. Eli mutta, että lasten ei tarvii niinku osata sitä vaan sitä asiaa tehdään tutuksi. Että sitten kun he menee kouluun niin jos ei he oo vielä sitä ehkä sitten oppinu eskarissa, taikka eivät osaakaan sitä niin kaikilla on semmonen tunne, että: ’Hei mää oon joskus kuullut tosta ja nähnyt tosta.” – Minna –

“Yes, we do practice doing some numbers, like eight. That is, but the children do not need to know how to do it, but things are made familiar. So, when they go to school, if they haven't already learned it in pre-school, or they don't know it, then at least all of them have the feeling that: "Hey, I’ve heard of this and seen it before.”

Each child has his or her own learning goals, which are decided upon by the teacher, child and parents/carers. This learning plan thus includes children's opinions and their wishes. The learning goals are taken from the child's immediate zone of proximal development, and therefore, it is possible for the child to achieve his or her own goals, which supports children's self-esteem and their possible success later in life.

> *"Koska tavallaan kuitenkin pitäis mennä kaikkia asioita läpi ja sen pohjalta on sitten helppo tehdä ne yksilölliset oppimissuunnitelma jokaiselle lapsille ja sitte taas niiden mukaan mennään sitte kevättä kohden. Se [OPS] on yleisesti ajateltu sillä lailla, että mikä on sitä 6-vuotiaan yleistä kehitystä. Sitte niinku yritetään...vahvistaa sillai, että kaikki pääsis lähelle y leensä sitä niinku semmosta ikätason mukaista kehitystä."* – Minna –
>
> *"Because in a way, we ought to go through all the things and starting with that it's then easier to make the individual learning plans for each child, and then again, follow them through spring. It [the curriculum] is generally thought of following the normative development of a 6-year-old. So, then, we try to...strengthen their age-appropriate development so that everyone gets close to it."*

Finnish teachers recognised that the children's development and age are well taken into account in the pre-school curriculum. The age of the child, and in particular his or her developmental age, is applied when planning and implementing the activities within the group of children.

> *"On se huomioitu hyvin. Että ne [vaatimukst] ei oo tosiaa semmosta tiukkaa, että kaikkien pitää olla tällä tasolla, tässä iässä, vaan se on semmosta...löysää."* – Leena –
>
> *"Yes, it has been taken well into consideration. So, that those [targets] are not that strict, like everyone should be at this level, at this age…instead it is loose like.*"
>
> *"On on, mun mielestä [kehitystaso] huomioitu hyvin että, pystyy niinku todella...siihen...yksilöllistämiseen."* – Noora –
>
> *"Yes, yes, in my opinion, those things [developmental age] are well taken into consideration that, like, really...it...can...be personalised."*
>
> *"Sehän on semmonen niin vapaa ja semmonen laaja, kokonaisvaltanen...Se antaa sen kehyksen meille, että mehän saajaan sitä toteuttaa oman mielemme mukkaa. Että ei se niinku rajaa millään lailla. Ja siinä on kyllä niinku jos aattelee tota ikää ja kehitystä on ne otettu huomioon siinä."* – Jaana –

> *"After all, it is so unrestricted, and so loose, comprehensive…It gives us the framework and then we are able to carry it out to our own liking. It doesn't limit in any way. And thinking of the age and development, it is taken into account there."*

Teachers are able to carry out their pedagogy as they seem fit. This includes play, listening and responding to children's voices. Therefore, teaching is structured on children's experiences and interests. All in all, the Finnish teachers felt that the pre-school curriculum gives them excellent and appropriate support, and the development of local curriculum further contributes to this satisfaction. Teachers adapt curriculum and teaching practices together with the children. They are pleased with the fact that the curriculum gives them freedom to plan instruction and apply their own personal strengths. The participants particularly appreciated the child-centredness and that emphasis is placed on the interests of the children. Group sizes are relatively small making it easier to embrace children's personal interests when planning and implementing the phenomenon-based activities. The current pre-school curriculum has a strong emphasis on learning through play, listening to children's voices and responding to these. Considering within the confines of the small sample, it could be concluded that English teachers still have little sense of pedagogy. And therefore, the teachers, rather than having a foundational understanding of pedagogy, tend to see teaching in terms of compliance and routines which are deployed to meet specified curriculum demands

The fifth interview question was aimed at discovering what kind of tools teachers use to evaluate children's learning.

Table 19. *What Kind of Tools do You use to Evaluate Children's Learning?*

Tools to evaluate learning		**Tools to evaluate learning**	
Category of Response	English Teachers (N=17) *f*	**Category of Response**	Finnish Teachers (N=20) *f*
Teachers choose evaluation tools independently	4	Teachers choose evaluation tools independently	20
Evaluation tools decided together by school's head teacher/deputy head/subject leader/teacher	7	N/A	
Teachers are given The National Assessment Test (SAT) by Government	17	No national testing	-
Daily observations	8	**Daily observations**	19
		Experiments, tasks (tests)	
Children are involved in evaluation e.g. peer and self-assessment	6	Parents and children are involved in evaluation and creating the child's Personal Learning Plan together with the teacher	20
Focus on academic skills	17	Focus on the all areas of child development	20

Table 19 illustrates what kind of evaluation tools teachers use in assessing children's learning.

Assessment of children's learning in the English primary schools is a legislative requirement. As stated in the literature review, individual schools are encouraged to employ the best assessment tools when evaluating their pupils. In England the Standards and Testing Agency has specified (STA, 2018b, 7) teachers' evaluation practices into three main forms.

Firstly, day-to-day formative assessments, which help teachers to inform their teaching on an ongoing basis. Nearly half of the English teacher's mentioned daily observations in their classrooms as an important way of gaining information about children's learning and important in planning their teaching.

> *"It's mainly just working in the classroom actually. I have a little book and…ermmm…if I notice something, I will jot it down for me, to be able to,*

put it in my planner for the next time. I do writing on their work. Things they need to do better next time. So, I'm kind of just evaluating and assessing them all the time." – Irene –

"Well, we do a variety of strategies, really. We walk around and assess the children. Really, it's that ongoing teacher assessment, but we'd build a picture of what the children can do and tick it off sheet basically." – Diana –

"I suppose, on the daily basis. We constantly observe as a member of staff. Talk about the children and how they're getting on. Things like that. Obviously, we do half term testing as well." – Nicole –

"So, it's…like reflecting on what they've done and what they need to do next. My lessons change all the time, depending on what, what they've understood and what they haven't." – Fiona –

Secondly, English teachers mentioned a variety of in school formative and summative assessments. These were classed as tests and utilised to understand pupil's performances mainly at the end of the term but included also weekly assessments like spelling tests.

"We do hmm…end of unit tests. In maths, they've had a reasoning test, an arithmetic test…independent writing for their, for literacy." – Kelly –

"We do…half termly tests. So, every half term they do…at least one maths test." – Melissa –

There was disparity on how much children are assessed and tested. 4 teachers out of 17 was able to select their evaluation tools and decide whether certain assessments happen. These responses were presented by teachers with a greater teaching experience.

"The only one that is dictated to us really, is…the ermmm…the reading test, that we did by it. Obviously, the SATs are determined by the Government. Ermmm…and…spelling test's, they're just a school procedure, really. So, those are in house. Ermmm…I think that's it. Anything else, I do, is down to what I chose to do in the classroom." – Helen –

"So, ermmm…we have to sit the SAT-tests. But we don't do other testing. It's all ongoing. It's in the work they're doing each day. During the lesson…the middle of the lesson you are assessing them and move them on." – Penny –

"But we're not test heavy. We try not to…test for testing sake. We only test if we need to." – Diana –

These experienced teachers mentioned they are able to choose their evaluation tools independently. This seemed more possible if the school has a small enrolment or the interviewed teacher was the subject coordinator.

> *"It is up to me, because the head…works quite closely with us and he listens to what we…what we want to do. Yeah, I feel quite pleased about that really. Because I know, it could be, could be different. I know we could be doing a lot more tests. But sometimes it wouldn't surprise me that the next time we have to do it, you know. At the moment it's just quite…it's ok."* – Irene – [Note: Nine pupils]

> "*Ermmm…we aren't forced to use anything by our head. I'm, I lead literacy. So, I…refuse for us to do some of these reading ages because I don't think they're useful. They don't tell me anything about a child's ability to read and comprehend or enjoy a story. And we are not doing things for the sake of them. And…we don't do things to please…the local authority for them to come in to moderate."* – Penny –

Six teachers out of 17 mentioned excessive amounts of testing in their schools.

> *"Lot of testing, teacher's assessment, using of samples that are given by the government that say...lots of moderation against those and working with the other staff with the same aged groups to make sure that her children match the same as my children, so we're constantly assessing our children, yeah, there is a lot of testing."* – Beth –

> *"Spelling tests weekly. Ermmm…we do written reading comprehension weekly. Ermmm…we do, guided reading… twice week. Ermmm…we do mental maths at the beginning of every maths lesson. Ermmm… yes, I think that's…quite a lot but I think that's it (laughing)."* – Helen –

> *"I write notes. And I use my teacher assessment. There's SPAG-test, you know, all the SAT-things, the phonics screening, all of that, and you know, and in between."* – Claire –

Seven teachers mentioned that either the head or deputy head teacher, subject coordinators and the class teacher decided upon the evaluation tools together.

> *"I…decided those with Key Stage 1 leader and the deputy head. But we choose the sample and the practice paper."* – Ruth –

> *"It tends to be a group decision of where we feel the children are. If we need one. Ermmm…the head teacher doesn't say we got to do this, this and this. Ermmm…so it tends to be what we feel that children need."* – Diana –

"To be fair, we are in a very, very fortunate position. We have a strong senior leadership team. Ermmm…and we, although they ultimately make the decision, we do have very open staff meetings…so, yeah, all those senior leaderships do dictate it and subject leaders." – Olivia –

Two teachers indicated that the assessment tools are given by the school leadership team.

"I think it was the head and deputy." – Melissa –

"Ours choose the head teacher." – Claire –

Teachers specified several different assessment tools. The most mentioned are listed as Table 19a below.

SATs	PiRA	The Oxford Owl
Peer-assessments	Spelling Assessment	Assertive Mentoring
Moderations	The Interim Assessment Framework	SPAG-tests

Table 19a. *English Evaluation and Assessment Tools Mentioned by the Teachers*

"We're also using…ermmm…a reading paper called: 'PiRA' (Progress in Reading Assessment)…we use the Oxford Owl...it's just online. It's…it's part of the Read, Write Inc. scheme but we don't use the whole scheme, because I think it's quite prescriptive." – Grace –

"We use Assertive Mentoring. Armm…so it's a lot of our literacy is all based on creative writing. So, they would do a piece and we'd would assess, against that." – Nicole –

"We moderate a lot, with the other teachers and the other year groups. We use TAs for assessments to report back to us what they've seen evidence of. We photocopy evidence and use it to back-up the ideas." – Julia –

Six teachers mentioned children's peer and self-assessments as ongoing strategy in the classroom.

"We also do a lot of peer and self-assessment as well." – Penny –

"Rather than…testing them. Ermmm…so it's about them working together. It's about using different strategies…ermmm…but it is about them…kind of working through it. Talking through that process, talking through the strategies that they'd used." – Olivia –

The stated evaluation practices lead to the third and major mandatory formal assessment in England, called Standard Assessment Task (SAT). SAT was mentioned by all of the English teachers as a mandatory procedure in the end of Key Stage 1. The SAT-test is applied to note pupil's performance in relation to national expectations and the results are used for comparisons between schools.

> *"The government dictates what we test, so we practice government's tests."* – Beth –
>
> *"Well, obviously, the government…the Department for Education. This is the SAT-test."* – Penny –
>
> *"So, obvious from the government, we use the SATs at the end of year."* – Grace –

Over half of the teachers mentioned that the children had been practising specifically for the SAT-test for a variety of reasons: acquaintance with the test format, familiarity with the standards and reduction of anxiety. Wrigley has predicted (2015, 9) that: "New assessment requirements will have a distorting and narrowing effect, and lead to teaching to the test."

> *"We only do SATs test practice because we need them to see what a one looks like. Because that's fair. So, that…if I didn't have to, I wouldn't."* – Penny –
>
> *"This year, we did lots of practice tests before we did the real test.* So, *we did lots of practice SATs-materials. Because the format had changed. So, we wanted the children to be familiar with what they were gonna be asked to do. And because of the standards…up to little bit as well. We didn't want them to get…frightened by the way that the questions were…proposed, we did lots of…sort of practice examples."* – Helen –
>
> *"We did one practice paper for each SAT-test. Ermmm…more to get the children use to the style…of paper than anything else. So, it wasn't a complete a shock for them on the day."* – Emma –

Claire continued and explained that the National Curriculum test system (SAT's) at the end of the school year (STA, 2018a) (Appendix 2), ultimately negatively affects child-led pedagogy and causes diminishment of the child's own initiatives.

> *"You want all this enthusiasm and you want them to be questioning. And you get up to Year 2, and it's like: 'Well, that's a great question' but actually I've got to do this today. And I've got to do that today…And we don't have time to go off at your tangent. People say: 'you should', but you actually don't have time to do that. They can say: 'Well you should be doing, should*

be children led'. But you still got to work towards these tests. It needs…I'm gonna say: exams. You still got to work towards them. So, you've got to, you've got to do what you got to do. So, all this: 'child-lead', I think is…not child lead." – Claire –

The teachers' responses also indicated that there is an issue with children's anxiety towards the SAT-test, and the teachers were critical of SAT-testing. As brought forth in the literature review testing young children will not necessarily provide accurate information on children's current knowledge and their deeper understanding.

"Test situations don't suit everybody. Anything they got to tick the sheet and you got multiple choice. You, you can't guarantee they actually really understood. Some things they really didn't understand." – Penny –

"And I think children don't always perform to a test. Some children work better…you know, when it's a less formal way of doing things. I think it's…they, they're so young. And they've [SATs] got harder. Which I think, is more difficult for them because there's more hoops to jump through…and they're six…those tests are a snip of that child on that particular day...there's no true reflection of the child in that point and time." – Fiona –

"Ermmm…some children had heard about them from parents or seeing things on the news. And were worried because they'd heard, that they would be really difficult and frightening. I don't think that they are…especially useful at this age. Anything, feeling a bit poorly, can affect their results…so much." – Emma –

"It's far too much for them. Mean you do…two maths tests every week, and spelling test every week. And then every half term they'd doing a longer one, that's at least an hour. And you just see their faces when they are doing it. It's awful. They just get really…down about it. Especially if there's one that they get a bit stuck on. So, I think it's a lot of opportunities for children to fail rather than succeed. But…got to do what we got to do." – Melissa –

Teachers were also worried about children's mental health, wellbeing, self-esteem and possible disengagement with their learning.

"Because schools can be…torn apart…based on their SATs scores. The government are less interested in…individuals…You are looking at children's wellbeing from so many areas. Ermm…and a lot of schools are frightened because if their scores dip…you get Ofsted. You get Ofsted…you get additional pressures. And you've other things forced upon you...It's all about the scores…rather than about the children…They're already predicting…what they're going to get in GSCE based on what

they're like at four. And it just seems ridiculous. Because…children change. You cannot predict…six years ahead. And that's what they're trying to do." – Penny –

"I think they'll become more disengaged with learning. They think: 'What's the point? I wasn't able to do it.' I just think it…the whole…their whole outlook on learning becomes a lot more negative. Because, why would you want to do something if you're gonna fail. So, you'd rather not try…than try it and then fail. Because that's what they'll think they'll do. So, I think it's a lot…yeah, very negative impact on it." – Melissa –

"Ermmm…I think lower down the school, they don't really have an understanding of what that means. But I think as they go through…into the juniors and Year 3, Year 4, Year 5 by the time they get to Year 6, if they've not reached age related expectations in all of those years, by the time they get to Year 6, they'd probably given up. So, yeah…quite harsh." – Helen –

Assessing and evaluating children's learning in English primary schools is legislative. The Standards and Testing Agency (2018b, 7) specify teachers' assessment practices and the schools are urged to employ evaluation tools. Firstly, eight English teachers mentioned day-to-day formative assessments as an important way of gaining information about children's learning and as of use in further planning. Secondly, various in school summative assessments were applied to detect pupils' current performance levels. This practice included daily and weekly assessments, like mental maths and spelling tests, and end of the term tests.

Finally, the Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs), were mentioned by all of the English teachers. The SAT's results are used to determine pupils' academic performance in relation to nationwide standards. Over half of the English teachers reported that children practise for their SAT-test. Practising was understood as important for several reasons: becoming familiar with the form of the test, understanding the test standards and possibly reducing the issues related to children's anxiety towards the test.

It was indicated, by the English teachers, that SAT-tests do not necessarily give a fair and honest description of young children's deeper understanding of subjects. If teaching and learning is mainly directed towards test taking, it might ultimately lead to limited knowledge.

Six English teachers mentioned excessive amounts of testing at a young age. The testing is aimed at academic subjects and takes into little account children's subjective development. This led teachers to be concerned about children's mental health, self-esteem and possible disengagement with their later learning. In conclusion, the English evaluation tools measure academic knowledge and do not consider children's holistic development and the importance of developing these during the year.

The Finnish teachers' comments and feelings about their evaluation tools and assessment practises will now be analysed.

All Finnish teachers stated that there are no specified or given national evaluation tools or testing kits for assessing the learning of six-year-olds children.

> *"Ne ei oo sillai pakolliset. Niitä voi käyttää mitä itsestä tuntuu parhaalta."* – Elisa –
>
> *"They are not in that way obligatory. They can be used for whatever you feel best."*
>
> *"Meillähän ei oo mittää semmosia virallisia testejä mitä pitäs kaikkien kans tehä*." – Leena –
>
> *"We do not have any kind of official tests that we should do with everyone."*

Teachers can use evaluation tools recommended by other professionals, but they are also free to choose the assessment practices themselves.

> *"Juu, et ei oo mitään määrättyä, että nämä täytyy tehdä ja tota itseasiassa mä vähän...pohdin käytänkö vai enkö käytä."* – Birgitta –
>
> *"Yeah, we don't have any standardised ones, that have to be done. Truth to tell, I've just...been pondering on whether if I'll use some or not."*
>
> *"Niitä ei oo todellakaan pakko tehdä. Ja sit mun mielestä kiva muutenkin tässä uudessa esiopetuksessa, että ei kaikkien tartte tehdä samoja asioita. Niin tää on siinä mielessä niinku...tosi kiva ja semmonen antaa niinku paljon mahdollisuuksia."* – Venla –
>
> *"No definitely you don't have to. And then, again, in my opinion, it's good in this new curriculum that not everyone needs to do the same things. So, in that sense, it's like...really good and therefore it offers more possibilities."*

Participants mentioned several different tests which they are free to apply or not. A number of these are listed here and a number of these have been further dealt with in the literature review. These exercises could be applied in the Autumn and then again in the Spring term.

LukiMat (The Reading Matic)	Mavalka (I Know Maths)	Eskarin Arki (Our Pre-school Day)
Pikkumetsän Esiopetus-Kirja (The Little Forest)	KTP (CDO)	Esko-havainnointilomake (Our Look-Out Form)

Table 19b. *Finnish Evaluation and Assessment Tools Mentioned by the Teachers*

The tested areas cover children's academic skills but also their expected normative development. Academic skills could include small assignments such as how a child recognises a word's beginnings and endings, letters, numbers and their concepts. Furthermore, the selected assessment forms measure children's social skills, fine and gross motor skills.

> *"Sitten meillä on Eskarin Arki...ja...Esko-havainnointilomake. Ja siellä on...hyvin monipuolisesti kanssa. Tota ihan, ihan äidinkielen, matematiikan havaintoon, motoriset taidot ja monipuolisesti on siinä. Pikkumetsän... tuota...opettajanoppaasta löytyy myös semmoset, missä voi ottaa havainnointilomakkeen ja sitten on tää KTP. Mavalkan olen tehnyt joillekin joilla on matematiikassa vähän ongelmia ja LukiMat on yksi."* – Elisa –
>
> *"Then we have 'Our Pre-school Day'...and…'Our Look-Out Observation Form. And these are...very versatile: observing language, mathematics, motor skills. 'The Little Forest'...teacher's guide includes the observation forms and then we have this CDO. I've done 'I Know Maths'-tests for the children who have some problems with maths and the other one is called 'The Reading Matic."*
>
> *"Joo, kyllä me syksyllä testaillaan näitä lapsia että, matemaattisia valmiuksia. Ihan numeroitten tuntemista, määrän ymmärtämistä. Samoin kielellisiä...tehhään saatetaan tehä justiinsa KTP: tätä tai ihan sitte tämmösiä muita...Ja sitten myös keväällä tehhään näitä samantyylisiä testejä, että onko edistytty ja onko jossakin sitten ongelmia. Niin kyllä ne niinku antaa sitä suuntaa, että jos lapsella on ihan hukassa niin...et kyllä me niitä ihan tehhään joka vuosi."* – Iida –
>
> *"Yeah, sure we test the children in the Autumn, for example, maths skills. Like, how they recognise numbers, understand quantity. Also, we might do language skills...we might do the CDO or something else…And then in the Spring we'll do similar kinds of tests to see their progress and if there are any problems. Yes, these lend direction that if the child has difficulties...yes we'll do these every year."*

Three Finnish teachers felt that the recommended or ready tests are too narrow or might not always fit well with the current group of children, therefore, they have modified the tests or made their own. These responses were presented by teachers with a greater teaching experience.

> *"Me ollaan kehitetty Sarin (nimi muutettu) kanssa omat. Et poimittu niinku....kaikkia mahollisia mitä nyt aatellaan. Kyllä se varmaan oli vähän suositus se Pikkumetsän...mutta must se oli vähän kapia-alainen, että enemmän on ite tuotu sitte siihen, että kerralla saa niinku tehtyä niitä."* – Katri –
>
> *"We have been developing with Sari (name changed) our own. We have picked like....different kinds of things. The Little Forest was recommended...but to me it was a bit narrow. We have added things to it, so we are able to do more at one time."*
>
> *"Sit meil on semmonen minkä mää oon itse vähän niinkun muokannu mun työparin kanssa. Tämmönen niinku kielellisiä...vahvuuksia...tota tarkasteleva testi."* – Pauliina –
>
> *"And then we have a self-adjusted one, me and my teaching partner made changes to. This test is about observing their competence in language."*

Finnish teachers did not feel that the word test was accurate. Rather than *testing* the children, the general feeling was towards getting to know the characteristics basics about each child. To accomplish that, the teachers mentioned individual conversations and performing small tasks with the children during the pre-school day.

> *"Että syksyllä tehhään semmosia kartotuksia. En puhu ees testeistä vaan kartotuksesta, että nähhään, että missä mennään."* – Katri –
>
> *"In the Autumn we do some mapping. I don't even talk about tests but mapping, so we can see where we are going."*
>
> *"Ei voi sanoa, että testejä, mutta semmosia harjotuksia."* – Noora –
>
> *"You couldn't call them tests, but rather like experiments."*
>
> *"Eikä ne oo mitään semmosia niinku virallisia testejä vaan, että ihan niinku juttelen lapsen kanssa niinku kirjaimista. Saatan alkusyksyst näyttää niinku kirjainlappuja että, mitä sää näistä tunnistat. Et ei mul oo mitään testipaperia eikä semmosta. Ihan juttelen ja mikä sitä lasta kiinnostaa ja...semmosista."* – Veera –
>
> *"And they aren't anything like official tests, but I just chat with a child about letters. For example, in the beginning of the Autumn, I could show letters*

and ask which ones you recognise. I don't have any test paper or anything like that. I just chat what the child is interested about and...things like that."

Despite the availability of pre-designed assessment tools, the teachers considered everyday observations to be the most effective means of assessment.

"*Tärkeintä on nää päivittäiset havaintojen teot."* – Elisa –

"The most important things are the daily observations."

"Sitte tietenki tämmöstä jatkuvaa havainnointia. Eli sitä lapsen toimintaa: leikkiä, kirjalliset tehtävät, sosiaaliset tilanteet ja sitte ihan tämmönen, että lapsen tyytyväisyys ja innokkuus olla eskarissa. Niin ...se on hyvin tärkeä juttu." – Heidi –

"And then of course, continuous observation. The child's activities: play, written tasks, social situations, and then also the child's satisfaction and enthusiasm about pre-school. Yeah... that's a very important thing."

In the beginning of the term the pre-school staff, guardians and the children fill in the child's *Pre-school Learning Plan (PLP)* (Appendix 4). This plan was mentioned as an important document by the participating teachers. According to the National Core Curriculum the Plan is optional, however all interviewed teachers have completed the process with respect to every child (FNBE, 2016, 33). The Child's Pre-school Learning Plan was seen as the starting point for planning, implementing and supporting children's growth and learning in cooperation with their parents (FNBE, 2016, 33).

"Ja sitten...tehdään...tämmönen ku lapsen esiopetuksen suunnitelma jokaisen kanssa. Ja siinä sillon keskustellaan vanhempien kanssa ja vanhemmat on erittäin tärkeässä asemassa tässä, omasta lapsestaan kertomassa." – Elisa –

"And then...we do...a sort of pre-school learning plan with everyone. And that's when we discuss with the parents, and the parents play a very important role in informing about their child."

"Tärkein on mulle se että, me tehään joka syksynä henkilökohtaiset oppimissuunnitelmat. Ja sinne tulee eri niinkun osa-alueista tavotteet." – Oona –

"The most important thing to me is that, every Autumn, we do the individual pre-school learning plans. And there will be targets for every developmental area."

Before meeting with the guardians, the teachers have observed and tested the children. These observations then serve as a starting point for the evaluation. Teachers may monitor a variety of issues: self-regulation skills, the child's self-concept and self-confidence, the child's social relationships, learning skills, play and how well the child is able to function in their everyday life in pre-school. Teachers mentioned that these observations are also used to identify missing developmental skills and accordingly set some of the child's pre-school learning plan (PLP) targets for his/her pre-school year.

> *"Joo, me pietään semmonen keskustelu syksyllä kun me ollaan pikkusen jo niinku havainnoitu lapsia. Sit me keskustellaan vanhempien kanssa ja käyvään lävitte semmonen havainnointilomake siinä. Ja...sitte katotaan että, mitä se ossaa jo, ja missä sil on vielä haasteita että, mihin kannattaa keskittyä ja mitä kotona voiaan tehä esimerkiksi lapsen kanssa. Ja mitä me voiaan täällä tehä. Ja sitten keväällä katotaan, että ollaanko me niihin tavoitteisiin päästy."* – Jaana –
>
> *"So, we'll have a meeting in the Autumn after we have already done some observing of the children. Then we talk with the parents and go through the pre-school learning plan. And...then we evaluate what he/she already knows and where there are still challenges, what to focus on and what can be done at home with the child, for example. And what can we do here. And then, in the Spring, will check whether we have achieved those goals."*

The children's self-evaluation, views and interests were seen as important because they promote children's self-esteem and help them to develop confidence as learners (FNBE, 2016, 38). The children's wishes are heard and written down. Furthermore, Finnish teachers encourage children to express what they like about pre-school, where they feel they have done well and what they would like to learn in the future (FNBE, 2016, 38).

> *"Myös se lapsi saa siinä niinkun äänensä kuuluviin. Ja lapselle tulee semmonen, että tää on tärkeä ja nyt niinkun tää palaveri on vaan niinkun minua varten ja puhutaan vaan niinkun minun asioistani."* – Senja –
>
> *"Also, the child makes his voice heard. And the child gets the feeling that this is important and now this meeting is just for me and we are talking only about me and my stuff."*
>
> *"Kyllä me kysytään lapsilta aina se, että mitä se haluaa oppia."* – Jaana –
>
> *"Yes indeed, we always ask children what they want to learn."*

Teachers felt that these small tests help them to make the right judgements for the children and therefore, further assist their learning journey. Notes from the teachers' observations are included in the child's pre-school learning plan.

> *"Yks oleellinen asia ja tottakai se lapsi tuntemus. Ja yksilöllisyyden huomioonottaminen, että jokainen henkilökohtaisesti niinku otetaan huomioon. Ja et sen arvioinnin kautta sitten tossa tiimissä tehään niitä suunnitelmia. Ja sitten erilaisia testejä tietenkin siitä lapsesta riippuen, että mitä hän tarvii ja mikä auttaa meitä sitte"* – Auli –
>
> *"One essential thing and most certainly, is that you know the children. And take their individuality into consideration, so that everyone is personally taken into account. And then through the evaluation, we as a team make those plans. And then apply different tests, depending on the child, and their needs and how it's going to help us."*

Finnish teachers found the evaluation tools helpful.

> *"Ilman muuta...siis jollakin tavalla mun olis kuitenkin niitä asioita testattava. Vaikka lapsella ei oo sitä oppimisen velvotetta, mutta jotta se laps sais sen mahdollisen tuen siellä ensimmäisellä luokalla jos hän sitä tarvitsee. Niin on siinä oltava mustaa valkosella. Se on niinku se palvelee kaikkia osapuolia."* – Minna –
>
> *"Without a doubt... somehow I have to test those things anyway. Although the child has no learning obligation, but to provide the child the potential support for the first grade if he needs it. So, it must be in black and white. It then serves all the parties."*

In summary, the twelfth interview question explored what kind of tools teachers use when evaluating children's learning. These findings indicated that there are no fixed national evaluation tools or testing apparatus applied in Finnish pre-primary education. Teachers are able to choose, create and employ freely their assessment practices depending on the needs of the child or the group of children. The teachers themselves felt that the word *test* is not appropriate and would rather use the term *experiments* or *small tasks*. These tests could be understood as a part of the pedagogy and encouraging teachers to apply their own judgement and professionalism when applying these tasks. Everyday observations were seen as the most important means of evaluating children. Furthermore, individual conversations and the performance of small tasks were employed to evaluate children's current knowledge, readiness levels and existing skills. All areas of child development are evaluated, not just academic domains.

Furthermore, the importance of the Child's Pre-school Learning Plan was mentioned as a starting point for co-operation with the families. One of the issues that emerges from these findings is that children's views are taken carefully into consideration in setting the individual learning targets and planning how to achieve these. The Finnish teachers also mentioned children's self-evaluation as an important process that helps implement and support their development and learning. The Finnish teachers felt happy and confident with their chosen evaluation tools.

The sixth interview question explores whether or not teachers are able to develop and apply exciting and stimulating lessons in accordance with the reformed curricula.

Table 20. *Do You Think You are Able to Develop and Apply Exciting and Stimulating Lessons According to the New Curriculum?*

Opportunities to develop exciting and stimulating lessons		**Opportunities to develop exciting and stimulating lessons**	
Category of Response	English Teachers (N=17) f	**Category of Response**	Finnish Teachers (N=20) f
Curriculum do not state specific limitations	12	Curriculum do not state specific limitations	20
Curriculum limits pedagogy	5	Curriculum limits pedagogy	-
Limitations: SAT's, Ofsted, expected levels to be achieved, excessive planning (time), curriculum's directional approach	12	Not curriculum related limitations: time, child-staff-ratio, physical conditions, finance, how to implement all children's requests	6

Table 20 summarises the applications of the curricula and attempts to discern whether: "Teachers can develop exciting and stimulating lessons to promote the development of pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills as part of the wider school curriculum" (DfE, 2014a, 6). Similarly, the Finnish National Core Curriculum (FNBE, 2016, 14) states that: "Pre-primary education shall be planned and implemented to give children opportunities to be inspired, experiment and learn new things." Furthermore, the teachers were asked if they are able to implement this in their daily lessons.

Both English and Finnish curricula propose that teachers are encouraged to utilise their own pedagogical judgement on how to teach children in their classroom. Furthermore, the English National Curriculum states that: "There is time and space in the school day and in each week, term and year to range beyond the National Curriculum specifications" (DfE, 2013b , 6).

12 English teachers out of 20 judged that they are able to plan and deliver the curriculum as they wish as long as the objectives are met.

"I'd like to think, I do (laughing)…we are not really dictated to…ermmm…how we deliver. We are delivering and making sure they're meeting the objectives…" – Grace –

"I think, again, like I said, in our school because, because ermmm…we are doing well. We have quite a lot of autonomy...so, we can. But we'd like to do more." – Penny –

"Yeah, I think we are actually. So, we're trying as best as we can, to make sure, that we're really ermmm…encouraging the children to love learning and finding out. Because that's what the new curriculum is really about. Deepening and broadening their understanding. So, we can give them as many opportunities as we can." – Diana –

Teachers alluded to the fact that it is their responsibility to make the curriculum interesting for the children. However, the new curriculum was experienced harder to deliver and therefore English teachers felt that they need to apply extra work to be able to develop those exciting and stimulating lessons. These responses were acknowledged regardless of teachers' teaching experience.

"I think that we are able to do that. I don't think it's stopped me from…doing exciting things. It just puts an extra demand on what you got to teach them." – Ruth –

"I think I will be able to. I think, this year it's been hard...when you actually look at the curriculum, it looks quite dry and quite dull. So, it's…thinking outside the box a bit and trying to find ways that are appealing to the children…and that are fun (laughing) which is quite usually the hard bit but, yeah." – Helen –

"I think…yes. But not every single lesson, in terms of exciting and stimulating." – Kelly –

Conversely, five of English teachers – regardless of their teaching experience – felt the new curriculum has several limitations and they are not able to deliver exciting and stimulating lessons for children.

"I'd say I'm not really able to do that. At the beginning of the week I plan what I want to do. And…most weeks I haven't done…nice things, I haven't done the exciting things. So, no, completely restricted, really." – Irene –

"I think you have the potential to do it. But in reality…no, because you have so much to cover. You haven't got every lesson to be some exciting, creative lesson. Cause you've got to move on so quickly. You don't have time for that." – Allison –

"Not really. You try to do as much as you possibly can as a teacher but…the time limits are so constraining, that it's just not always possible…sometimes you feel like you're just teaching to make sure that everything's been completed before they get to end of the year."– Nicole –

The perceived pressure of SAT-tests and Ofsted were considered to be the major reasons for limiting the teachers' delivery of the curriculum enjoyably. These specific obstacles were mentioned by most of the teachers, including some of the teachers who firstly stated that they are able to deliver the curriculum without limitations.

> *"There are limitations because…you're very aware that this is the end of the Key Stage. And the children have got to… armm…take part in their SAT's. So that does limit… the freedom that you have because you have to make sure that you got the children well prepared for it."* – Julia –
>
> *"We are tied because you got SAT's coming up and…and we are not able to have Golden Time or anything what they should."* – Kelly –
>
> *"And limitations…certainly things like SATs. Ermm…fears that Ofsted would not like certain things. Ermmm…and obviously, these expectations of the particular levels that you've got to get them to. Ermm…mean, sometimes you're just focusing on trying to…get something achieved…rather than…making it stimulating and exciting."* – Penny –

These two main reasons, SAT's and Ofsted, seem to elicit the strongest expressions of feeling in the teachers. Fear, judgement and lack of freedom were mentioned. Furthermore, the English teachers reported that they do not want to take risks with 'fun and exciting' because of the possible Ofsted inspections and the results of formal assessments.

> *"One limitation is time, I would say. Another limitation is…hmmm…the SAT's and the formal assessment…hmmm you end up teaching for… the test, if you like. And that doesn't allow for exciting teaching…and yeah…Ofsted expectations…I wouldn't take the risk. I am doing as I'm told (laughing*)." – Lea –
>
> *"…there's people that come and see what you are doing. That's…I sort of start how I see Ofsted. They're people that come in just to see what you are doing. I guess there are…limitations. I know you still got to meet the objectives, no matter how you do it."* – Fiona –
>
> *"I mean, obviously, it's not just the pressure of the curriculum. There's pressure from everywhere else. And obviously Ofsted."* – Nicole –

As stated above, the majority of the English teachers felt it is possible to develop exciting and stimulating lessons, however an equal amount of teachers subsequently did point out limitations set by curriculum. Others, not directly

curriculum related reasons, were time restrictions and work exhaustion. According to Nicole, the new curriculum provides guidance but at the same time it was also seen as constraining teachers' creativity because of its overly directional and demanding approach.

> *"It's…it's a difficult one because…I do feel like it…it shows you, it guides you more than the last curriculum. But at the same time, it stops you from feeling free to be creative and have the time to do things."* – Nicole –

> *"Hmm...it is quite possible, but you are restricted. Hmm…and I don't think people often got the time and the energy to…provide exciting, stimulating lessons cause they got too many other…hmm…things to think about."* – Lea –

> *"All that time, all that planning, to make sure that you're covering this and you're showing everybody that you're covering this. That could be used to, you know, make some fabulous resources to, you know, get a wonderful plan together to get…stuff for roleplay all of which takes time. But…your time is limited. And, and it's spent on the wrong things, in my opinion."* – Claire –

As stated in the literature review, children's learning experiences need to be made meaningful and if so, they are more likely to produce higher levels of academic engagement, achievement and personal fulfilment. The English teachers acknowledged that it is important to listen to children's wishes when planning and delivering the lessons. But in many instances the child's role was seen as less important.

> *"We could discuss this or this or have you got any more ideas? So, we look at what we think will work. And we, vote on it and we look at ideas. Ermm…so, we try to make them active where possible. Obviously, there are some things where…I just have to teach them certain things and they just have to…accept that and get on with that. But where we can, we want the child's role to be involved."* – Penny –

> *"…if there's a particular area that the children are interested in. You could maybe move into that area a bit more. Let them be little bit more…pupil led."* – Julia –

> *"They're just told what to do mainly. You know, they don't have a lot of time to speak and tell us their thoughts…so, yeah, they just kind of get along with things really…I think, with younger children, especially, is mainly just, just do as you're told and… kind of abide by the rules."* – Irene –

It appeared that the English teachers really wanted to get children more involved but were restricted by the curriculum requirements and targets.

"And I like it sometimes when they come in on Friday morning, just for half an hour and I do let them have bit of a choose on the maths game or something... but I don't want that on my timetable (whispering), which is terrible because they should be able to do it, shouldn't they? It's really important. Instead of handwriting or some...I try and make the best… of… the situation that we are in." – Beth –

Most of the curriculum topics were chosen by the teachers. However, there were some indications that the children have a chance to voice their opinions. However, the final decision was made by the teachers and they decided what they think might be the interest of the children. But setting up and planning the topics were, in some cases, decided before the next term and therefore not really knowing the group of children.

"It was us as a teacher's…it comes as a team effort, eventually you come to one idea. And, right, that's what we're gonna do." – Fiona –

"All of the Year 2 teachers choose together, the year before, what the next year's topics will be." – Emma –

"All the topics for our…year group, have been picked by the staff in conjunction with talking to the children on a previous year…ermm…all English books are picked by myself to make sure that they hit the curriculum and are appropriate for children…and every year…we tweak things and depending on what sort of class you got, you might go down a slightly different route." – Penny –

"They don't take themselves where they want to go…so, there is some freedom. Armmm… but it's the amount of freedom that these children can handle." – Julia –

As attested to by the teachers, providing exciting and stimulating lessons approved to be a difficult task. However, when creating exciting and fun activities, teachers felt uncomfortable in not doing their jobs properly. Teachers reflected on their current working conditions as controlled and disappointing. They also felt upset by putting extra pressure on the children's learning instead of providing age related activities. Several negative emotions were mentioned by teachers including annoyance, guilt and sadness. These responses were widely acknowledged regardless of teachers' teaching experience.

"It's annoying. It's taking the joy out of the job and I don't think the children are enjoying it either. So…yeah, not good…I see myself just really as, someone doing as they're told. If I'm honest. I don't, I'm kind of…I'm just

the manager. We can-do one-off things which take…a lot of preparing. And, and it always means, if I'm doing like a really exciting…afternoon…it, it does mean that…I'm not doing some…I feel that I'm not doing something else properly. You know, I feel a little bit guilty for it, if I'm honest. Ermmm…we're completely…just told what to teach. So…there's no imagination at all in my teaching anymore. I'm just told what to teach." – Irene –

"It makes me feel really sad. And I think it could be a lot better. Cause you got a fabulous workforce. And, you know, and they're not being used in the right way and people are not happy…People with wonderful experience and all of this, you know, filling in the forms and ticking off this and checking off this. It puts people, you know, people off. It should be about working with the children and getting the best out of them and it isn't." – Claire –

"Makes you feel like you are not really doing your job properly. Because we are here for the children to make their learning for them exciting and…to them to enjoy school. And sometimes you feel like you are putting pressure on them to learn things that they're not always ready for." – Nicole –

In conclusion, the majority of the English teachers felt it is possible to develop exciting and stimulating lessons in their classroom. Despite the English National Curriculum purporting that there is time and opportunity to range beyond the National Curriculum specifications, five of English teachers felt though that they are not able to provide those engaging and fun lessons for children. When contemplating the other possible limitations on their pedagogy, teachers mentioned SAT's and Ofsted inspections. A total of 12 teachers claimed these two aforementioned aspects were the main obstacles thwarting with their teaching. As stated earlier by Clark (2018, 80) this possibly restricts the creativity of the teachers' pedagogy and marginalizes their own professional judgement. In addition, English teachers claimed that there is a lack of time, particularly in areas of deprivation where apprehension concerning Ofsted is possibly significantly greater. As a consequence, teachers may not be able to experience professional autonomy. Their ability to teach autonomously is constrained by excessive testing, a considerable workload and the demands of accountability. English teachers commented it is easier to follow guidelines than take unnecessary risks with exciting lessons because of Ofsted inspections and the formal assessment results. Other reasons were time restrictions and possible lack of energy. The teachers mentioned that they made the final decision on what they thought might

be the best interest of the children. Therefore, the curriculum topic choices were decided beforehand - by teachers - for the next term without having the full knowledge of the new children's real interests. In addition, English teachers claimed that there is not much time, particularly in areas of deprivation where the Ofsted fear is possibly greater. Overall, it could be suggested that the English teachers felt controlled, annoyed, saddened and in some cases a failure as a teacher.

The following is an analysis of the Finnish teachers views on their current pre-school curriculum and its delivery: whether they are able to give the children opportunities to be inspired, explore and discover new things.

None of the Finnish teachers felt that the curriculum limits or constrains their teaching. The applied pedagogy was considered uncomplicated and teachers felt that their own enthusiasm and imagination was the key to children's successful learning.

> *"No kyllä mun mielestä pystyy. Kyllä se on niinku tosi paljon siitä omasta mielikuvituksesta kiinni."* – Riitta –
>
> *"Well, yes, I figure we can. Yes, it is so much up to your own imagination."*
>
> *"En ole kokenut tätä rajoitukseksi, asiahan on todella tärkeä. Parhaiten lasten innostusta ja oppimista kuvaa lapsen sitoutuminen tekemiseensä."* – Ursula –
>
> *"I have not experienced this as a limitation, after all its really important. The best way to describe children's enthusiasm and learning is their commitment to what they do."*
>
> *"Mun mielestä ei aseta. Se ei aseta sen takia koska ne menetelmät on vapaat. Mää näen sen näin, että toki meillä on tavotteet ja ne mitä pitää oppia ...mutta muuten mä voin itse keksiä ihan miten mä haluan ne opettaa....että, ko periaatteessa mitä vaan pystyy opettaan missä vaan, kunhan sä vaan suunnittelet sen (naurua)."* – Pauliina –
>
> *"In my opinion, it doesn't. It doesn't limit because the methods are open. I think about it like this, of course we have goals and what we need to learn...but otherwise I can actually come up with however I want to teach them…so in actuality anything can be taught anywhere, as long as you plan it (laughter)."*

The teachers felt they are free to apply their pedagogy even when the curriculum decrees some set learning goals. The curriculum does not dictate methods and therefore it unleashes teachers' creativity. Teachers mentioned that careful preparation and organisation is the key to creating the best learning conditions.

The teachers mentioned limitations similar to those of the English teachers in connection with lesson planning. Six Finnish teachers stated that financial concerns, lack of time, staff-child-ratio and physical conditions set some limitations. Furthermore, the Finnish teachers felt that sometimes it was difficult or impossible to accommodate every wish the children had when planning the activities.

> *"Rajoituksena on taloudelliset resurssit, mitkä pitää ottaa huomioon. Myös aikuisten määrä on rajallinen, mikä vaikuttaa toimintaan. Suunnittelun tekoon käytettävä aika on riittämätön."* – Oona –

> *"Financial resources are limited and that needs to be taken into account. Furthermore, the number of adults is also limited, which has an effect on what we do. There's insufficient time for planning."*

> *"Isoin rajoitus minkä siinä koen, niin on aika. Et millä ajalla valmistella niitä? Esimerkiksi jos on semmosia asioita mitkä vaativat valmistelua mahdollisesti materiaalin hakemista jostakin, materiaalin esille ottamista. Myös ympäristön muokkaaminen toimivaksi on haaste. Miten saada jokaisen lapsen toiveet kuulluksi, huomioon otetuiksi?"* – Birgitta –

> *"The biggest restriction, I feel, is the time. What time do you have to prepare things? For example, if there is anything that requires preparation, you may need to search for resources somewhere, set up the material. Making the environment workable is also a challenge. How to make every child's wishes heard, taken into account?"*

As stated in the literature review: "The activities are planned with the child at their centre with the purpose of strengthening the child's positive self-image and perception of himself or herself as a learner" (FNBE, 2016, 14). Teachers stated that the children's wishes need to be taken into careful account when planning and implementing daily activities. Teachers mentioned that the children are encouraged to think, decide and vote upon their ideas and actions. Teachers saw themselves as active facilitators and therefore helping the children on their learning journey.

“Lapsen oma ääni saa kuulua entistä enemmän niin suunnittelussa, toteutuksessa kuin arvioinnissakin. Pidämme lasten kanssa palavereja, jossa lapset saavat ideoida omaa toimintaansa.” – Noora –

“The child's own voice can be heard more when planning, implementing including in evaluation. We hold meetings with the children, where they are allowed to bring in their ideas for their activities.”

“Otan lapset mukaan suunnittelemaan toimintaa, mistä he haluavat tietää lisää, mitä harjoitella ja mitä kokeilla. Pyrin ottamaan huomioon erilaiset opiskelutavat ja mielenkiinnon kohteet. Ulkoilemme eri paikoissa, usein lapset saavat äänestää missä ulkoillaan, mutta paikkoja vaihdellaan, että kaikkien mielipaikoissa käydään.” – Oona –

“I get the children involved in planning the activities, what they want to know more about, what to practise and what to experience. I try to take into account their different types of learning styles and interests. We go out on different places, often the children get to vote where they want to go, but we change the places so that everyone's favourite places are visited.”

Teachers attempt to inspire and encourage children to try, let them make mistakes, and help them to discover themselves how things work and why. Teachers expressed satisfaction with their teaching and felt that achievements were enjoyed together with the children. The teachers emphasised the concept that children learn in different ways and teachers aimed at children’s developmental stage and interests when applying various forms of pedagogy.

“Lapsi oppii asioita sen oman mielenkiinnon ja sen hetkisen tarpeen ja kehitysvaiheen mukkaan. Ja sitten lapsethan antaa niitä ideoita mihin suuntaan sitte eskariopettajan ois hyvä viiä sitä toimintaa. Et jos lapset on kiinnostunu jotakin jutuista niin voi sitä omaa alkuperäistä suunnitelmaa muuttaa ja ottaaki sen lapsen antaman idean siihen.” – Heidi –

“A child learns things according to his or her own interest and current needs and stage of development. And then the children express those ideas which a preschool teacher should use to help guide how she directs activities. If the children are interested in certain things, then I can change the original plan and use the ideas given.”

“Lapsi saa kokeilla erilaisia oppimiskeinoja ja kehittää itseään mieluiseksi kokemallaan tavalla ja...kaikkea tämmöstä kokeilua ja erehtymistä ja ilahtumista ja, sitte jakaa omia havaintojaan ja olla siinä ryhmän jäsenenä.” – Elisa –

“A child gets to try out different ways of learning and to develop himself / herself in the way he / she likes and…all this kind of experimentations and mistakes and joys and then can share their own observations be as a member of a group.”

Teachers felt that the child should be given the opportunity to try out different ways of learning and to develop himself or herself in the way he or she finds best. All such investigations and own observations were seen as part of the child's subjective experience which needs to be recognised. Usually the input comes from the children and their learning might take other routes because of their interest and then lead on to other topics. Teachers attempt to utilise children's suggestions as much as possible.

> *"Tämähän lähtee just näistä lasten innostuksista ja lasten havainnoista, ja omasta niinkun lapsen elämästä ja kokemuksista. Että lapsilla on aika aika iso valta itse päättää, että mihin suuntaan sitten mennään siinä."* – Noora –
>
> *"The learning begins with the children's enthusiasm and perceptions and reflects their life and experiences as a child. The children have a pretty big power to decide for themselves what direction we then take."*
>
> *"..lapsella...täytyy olla se mahdollisuus saada vaikuttaa ja olla se oma itsensä. Ja sitte tavallaan, että se ei oo vaan niin että, meillä on se tieto jota me kaadetaan sinne lapsiin vaan, että se on myös semmosta niinkun vuorovaikutteista se toiminta."* – Senja –
>
> *"…the child…must have the opportunity to influence and to be himself. And in a way, it's not just us who have the knowledge and we're pouring it in the children but more like we all work together, influencing one another."*
>
> *"Ja... tota...se...toki me otetaan niinku huomioon se, että...mikä sen lapsen kiinnostuksen kohde on. Että eihän me voida...syöttää sitä, meidän näkemystä...tavallaan niinku niille lapsille, että jos niitä ei kiinnosta yhtään*." – Carita –
>
> *"And...of course...we take it into consideration that...what is the child's interest. That we can't...spoon feed our view...to those children if they are not at all interested ."*

In summary, the Finnish teachers stated that the new pre-school curriculum supports well their pedagogy and that they are able to use their imagination and creativity whilst teaching. Teachers also felt that the children's opinions are emphasised even further now in the new curriculum when planning and implementing activities. It was mentioned that the children's individuality is taken into consideration, and their wishes are respected. All in all, the teachers thought they are able to give children opportunities to be inspired, to experiment and to

learn new things. However, some non-curriculum related limitations were mentioned, such as; time, finances, child-staff-ratio and physical conditions. Furthermore, teachers felt that sometimes it was challenging or impossible to implement all of the children's requests. Overall, the Finnish teachers felt pleased with their curriculum and were happy with the way they were able to practise their pedagogy.

The seventh interview question explores whether the children have opportunities to make independent choices about their own learning experiences.

Table 21. *To What Extent the Children Have Opportunities to Make Independent Choices about Their Own Learning Experiences?*

Children's opportunities to make independent choices about their learning experiences	**English Teachers (N=17)**	**Children's opportunities to make independent choices about their learning experiences**	**Finnish Teachers (N=17)**
Category of Response	%	**Category of Response**	%
Child-selected activities	10	Child-selected activities	40
Teacher-directed whole class activities	75	Teacher-directed whole class activities	28
Together with the children	15	Together with the children	32
TOTAL	100		100

Table 21 summarises teachers' views as to what extent they think the children have opportunities to make independent choices about their own learning experiences. Teachers were asked to distribute 100% among three different themes: A) child-selected activities, B) teacher-directed whole class activities and C) things decided together with the children.

This question was also linked to process quality factors and high-quality learning opportunities for young children in England and Finland. The answers exposed the relationship with these three components and whether the children have quality learning opportunities such as independent play opportunities or if children are able to make decisions together with the teaching staff (Mathers et al., 2014, 55; Munn, 2010, 1; Sylva et al., 2006, 78).

Overall, both teacher groups found this question hard to answer accurately. Therefore, the answers are reflective of teachers' feelings as percentages rather than accurately calculated statistics on how pedagogy is offered in reality.

> *"It's difficult to put a figure on it. Ermmm…it comes out what your classes like as well…ermmm…so it varies from week to week, I suppose, but generally I'd would imagine it's more teacher directed, higher percentage than child."* – Diana –
>
> *"It's different for each day. It's a tricky one."* – Allison –

English teachers found this question difficult because the curriculum can vary noticeably during the school week and depending on what time of the year it is. Also, practice exams and the actual SAT-tests control the planning and have an effect on pedagogy.

> *"…depending on what time of the year, it would change an awful lot."* – Olivia –

> *"Ermmm…particularly in the summer term, for more child selected activities, cause usually by then…we've done the testing, we've done the SATs, we've got that out of the way."* – Helen –

> *"But like I said, post SATs, when we have Arts Week. Then there will be different activities out. But bless them, there is a split into pre and post SATs."* – Julia –

> *"Yeah, I mean, it can vary from lesson to lesson. It can vary…but your core subjects: your maths, your engl…your literacy…I think it's pretty much…what I said."* – Claire –

Overall, the English teachers' views were very similar regarding the time split between these three categories. In total, child-selected activities were judged as 10%. Teachers felt there is no time to follow children's wishes, mainly because of the curriculum's extensive requirements.

> *"Child-selected probably only about 10%...Ahmm… teacher-directed 90% is what I decide what we are doing…I may be given 10% of a choice for what they are doing here."* – Beth –

> *"This sounds awful but child selected activities, I've only put 10%. Because, I think it's not very often that they get time to choose their own…but there's just so much that you've got to get in, I just…I don't feel like there's time for them. Yeah, ermmm…teacher directed, I've put 70%. It probably is. And then deciding things together is probably about 20%, I think."* – Grace –

Seven of the English teachers estimated that the children are able to choose their activities only between 0-5%.

> *"In Year 2 the children do not select their own activities…Well…they might select their own apparatus. Hmmm…and they might…select how they do something. But they don't choose what they're going to be learning."* – Lea –

"I would say…it's quite zero. They don't choose anything...I think, very rarely the children fully select what they do completely independently." – Kelly –

"So actually, child selected it's probably 0%. It's deciding things together that's the 10%." – Melissa –

"…child selected activities, this year hasn't happened a lot at all. So, the majority is probably being teacher directed. I would say…child selected activities, probably about 5% this year. Which then means that…85% for B." – Helen –

"I would say…perhaps really low…child selected activities. Cause we…they don't even do that…Golden Fridays, or anything…so that is really low. Over the year…5% if that. Teacher directed…oohh…crikey 90%. And you decide things with the children for 5%, that adds up, doesn't it?" – Claire –

Penny and Diana mentioned the highest, 30% for when the teacher decides together with the children.

"I think in terms of child selected. It's very little opportunity for them to…pick something completely…independently…Ermm…a lot of it is teacher directed. Ermmm…we do decide a lot together…with the children…would be about 30%. But the rest is teacher directed (60%). Just for covering the content with the curriculum." – Penny –

"And then C. We do decide lots of things together, actually. So, probably…a good 30%. We do…we do talk about things together and decide what we're going to do together." – Diana –

13 English teachers agreed that most of the pedagogy is teacher directed throughout the school year. Again, it appears that the National Curriculum dictates pedagogy along with the testing requirements.

"I'd say definitely most of the day is…teacher directed, because it's got to be, to get through…all curriculum." – Allison –

"I knew what we needed to cover, and because I knew what they'll be tested on, having to get the work done. So, a lot of it…has been this year…down to what I knew they needed to cover. Ermmm…so, it's being directed by me." – Helen –

"Ermm…I probably say 80% teacher…ermmm B…I actually even 85%. 85% and then 10% for C. And then…5% for the top one." – Irene –

Teachers mentioned that there is a good attempt to try to share and decide things together with children, however teachers felt that the curriculum restrictions do not yield much room for this practice.

> *"We will try to decide things together with the children. Sometimes if they have a particular interest in one area for a topic. We will go off…towards that area. So, in that case, it could be a higher percentage for C. Ermmm…the curriculum unfortunately doesn't allow…very much…free time for the children to select their own activities. Sometimes we'll give children a selection of activities and they will choose from that section. But completely child initiated, there's not much…time for that in our curriculum."* – Emma –

> *"So, I do feel like even thou I'm directing it. I'm still trying to make it practical and play like as much as I can."* – Grace –

Teachers also acknowledged that there should be more freedom for the children to choose. Teachers felt that children's own interest would motivate them better and it would lead onto better learning experiences.

> *"I think, it's quite a shame. When I first started teaching, there was a little bit more time for the children to select their own activities. They were always engaged, because they'd chosen it…But I think they learn so much, and they remember so much when they've chosen something they're really, really interested in."* – Emma –

> *"Ermmm…I, I'd wish it was more child selected…but I just don't know how...you can make it like that and fit everything that is expected to, these children have to be…able to do, at the same time, and it is finding that happy balance and…yeah. Tell me when you found it and how to do it (laughing)."* – Grace –

The seventh question reflected teachers' views on what extent the children have opportunities to make independent choices about their learning experiences. Overall, two teachers out of 17 felt that the children are able to select activities independently. Seven teachers felt that the children's opportunities to choose their activities fell as low as 0-5%. The main reason for this was encountering the curriculum objectives, SAT-tests, and the time spent practising for these. The National Curriculum, along with testing requirements, was seen to influence teachers' pedagogy. Therefore, most of the English teachers judged their

pedagogy as being teacher-directed whole class activities. These responses were widely acknowledged regardless of teachers' teaching experience. However, children were offered more exciting and independent choices after the SAT-test took place. Available learning opportunities are associated with process quality factors and high-quality learning (Mathers et al., 2014, 55; Munn, 2010, 1). Teachers stated that they try to share and make decisions together with children and wished there were more opportunities for children's self-selected choices. English teachers acknowledged the situation but felt that the curriculum creates limitations. Teachers felt that children's learning experiences would benefit from children's own involvement and help with motivation. According to several studies (Mathers et al., 2014, 55; Munn, 2010, 1; Sylva et al., 2006, 78) the respondents' answers can be related to process quality learning opportunities revealing negative quality opportunities when involving the children.

Next, an analysis of the Finnish teachers' perspectives on the children's possible involvement opportunities.

Finnish teachers also found it difficult to determine percentages among the three choices.

> *"Hirveen vaikee laittaa tommonen prosenttiluku. Kun sitten joku...juttu voi olla semmonen, että lapset päättää enemmän...ja sitte toisinpäin niin mää voin päättää enemmän."* – Veera –
>
> *"It is very difficult to put a specific percentage. When some…things can be so that children decide more…and then the other way 'round that I decide more."*
>
> *"Jaa-a. Tää onkin vaikea laittaa prosentteihin. Et se vaihtelee päivittäinkin aika paljon."* – Oona –
>
> *"Well. This is hard to put into percentages. It can vary quite a bit even during the same day."*

Three Finnish teachers felt they were unable to allot accurate percentages.

> *"No, tiiäkkö mää en ossaa sannoo noita prosentteja. Mutta niitä tullee semmosia tilanteita, että...ei me orjallisesti toimita niinku on sanottu. Tai sitten jos meillä on vaikka joku...aikuisia pois niin me jouvutaan muuttaa*

ne...tilanteet...sen mukkaan mikä meillä päivässä on mahollista tehä." – Jaana –

"Well, you know, I can't say those percentages. Because there are situations where...we don't follow to the letter what someone tells us to. Or if we don't have enough teaching staff, we have to change those...situations...according to what we can do that day."

Judging from their answers, apparently the Finnish teachers did not view the three choices provided as limited and strictly defined, but as somewhat of an overlapping scale.

"Mut periaatteessa se, että tota kun se menee vähän sillai limittäin sitten siinä [opetusuunnitelmassa]. Kyllähän me niinkun suunnitellaan ja siinä tehdään mutta, lapset pystyy sitten tietyissä asioissa niinkun varioimaan, että tee näin tai tällä tapaa, että vaikka se niinkun se semmonen ohjeistus olis annettu johonkin." – Taina –

"Although in principle, it kind of works a bit like overlapping with what's in it [curriculum]. Yes, we do plan and do it, but the children can make changes on certain things, like let's do something like this, or that way, even though the guidelines have been for something different."

As in the English teachers' responses, the Finnish teachers indicated that the time of the year, e.g. the end of pre-school year, could affect the range of the children choices.

"Meillä on tää toukokuu sitte, et lapset on saanu päättää koko kuun ohjelman...niinku lasten...toiveitten mukkaan." – Heidi –

"It's May after all, and therefore, the children have been able to decide the whole month's program...like following the children's...wishes."

Eight teachers out of 20 felt that - even though they are responsible for the final decisions as to arrangements - the children have the opportunity to influence the planning and therefore shape their selected activities. This could be seen as a constantly repeated cycle of modification of pedagogy, which includes the contributions of all parties. As stated before, the curriculum gives the guidance, teachers observe the children and then the activities are developed together to provide the best learning experiences.

“Me kyllä suunnitellaan koko viikko ja ne mitä me tehdään niin ne tukee asioiden oppimista. Sanotaan näin, että tuetaan sitä oppimista muttei niinku opeteta. Ja lapset saa vaikuttaa niihin menetelmiin. Mun täytyy miettiä, että hei jos tää asia on nyt pakko mennä läpi niin miten tän voi tehdä niin leikinomaisesti, että sitte ei tunnu, että se leikki jää liian vähille. Se täytyy niinku säilyä se sopusuhde niin silloin he niinku jaksaa oppia ja ottaa sitä sitä semmosta ohjausta vastaan.” – Minna –

“We do plan the whole week and what we do so that it supports the learning objectives. Let's out it this way...it supports learning, but it does not teach. And children are allowed to influence those methods. I have to think, that hey, if this thing has to be learnt now, how can I do it so playfully that, after all, it doesn't feel like we are missing out on play too much. We need to maintain the balance and therefore they are ready to learn and accept willingly guidance.”

“No kun mun tekis mieli sanoa, et se lapsi päättää siitä aika lailla itse. Et totta kai se viikkosuunnitelma jonka aikuiset luo niitten havaintojen perusteella siitä lapsesta niin sehän on kuitenkin se sen aikuisen tekemä mutta, että siihen lisätään lapsen toiveita jolloinka hän myös itse päättää. Tottakai opettaja niin kun määrittelee tiettyjä asioita. Että semmosessa hyvässä hengessä ja vuorovaikutuksessa ja niin, että lapset ovat tietoisia asioista ettei tuu semmosia yllättäviä asioita, et ennakoidaan...että aattelemme niin, että lapset päättää omasta oppimisestaan ja me ollaan siinä tukena ja turvana.” – Auli –

“Well, I want to say, it's the child who decides it for himself pretty much. Of course, there is the weekly plan that the adults have created, based on their observations on that child, and that's the adult’s duty, but then we add those child's wishes so that he also has a say in things. Of course, the teacher determines certain things. But all in a good atmosphere and interaction, and so that the children are aware of what’s going on and that there won’t be unexpected things, so we can predict…we think, that the children decide their learning and we are there for their support and safety.”

The Finnish teachers felt it necessary to plan the whole class activities in advance but if need be, the plan was perceived as changeable and flexible. In total the teachers estimated that 28% of the time spent in pre-school was teacher-directing whole class activities.

“Mää oon laittanu kolmasosan, että jos olis opettajalta.” – Elisa –

“I put one-third, maybe that’s from the teacher.”

“Toisaalta aikusjohtoista, mutta tottakai me annetaan sille lapsenki...työlle ne raamit...Jos meillä on suunniteltu joku juttu vaikka sisällä ja ulkona on

aivan uskomattoman hieno ilma, niin me pystytään tekeen toisena päivänä ne ja lähetään vaikka metsäretkelle...että kyllä me ollaan aika joustavia." – Iida –

"On the one hand, adult directed, but of course we give the children a framework for their activity...If we have something planned inside, and there is absolutely amazing weather outside, we can do it another day and go out for a forest trip...yes we are quite flexible."

Seven Finnish teachers said that they often decide matters together with the children. The final planning and decision-making come from the teachers, but the children influence those ideas and therefore create the possible alterations throughout the week. These responses were mainly presented by teachers with a greater teaching experience.

"Onko se sitten se 30%...että siihen viikkosuunnitelmaan niihin saa lapset ehdottaa...he saavat siihen kertoa. Sitte pohditaan, että: olisi ihana lähtee metsäretkelle. Voitasko me tehdä metsäretki? Niin ilman muuta...et niinku tämmösiä sovittavia asioita." – Birgitta –

"It could be 30%ish...the children can make suggests and express their wishes concerning our weekly plan. After that, we consider together: It would be wonderful to go on a forest trip. Can we make a forest trip? Well, of course...we agree on those sorts of things together."

"..lapset ja opettajat yhdessä, niin mää oon sinnekin laittanu kolmasosan, että tavallaan se ois niinku kaks kolmasosaa tulis niiltä lapsilta." – Elisa –

"…the children and the teachers together, so I put that one-third. So, in that way it would be like two-thirds from the children."

Taken together, Finnish teachers found it hard to decide on percentages. The choices provided were seen as interrelated, and therefore three of the Finnish teachers were unable to give a specific percentage at all. Much as for the English teachers, the time of the school year affected the chosen pedagogy. Eight of the Finnish teachers felt that the children are actively involved in making decisions about their instruction and in choosing topics of interest. In spite of the teacher being ultimately responsible for the final decision, seven of the Finnish teachers said that they decide matters together with the children. Children's involvement influences the planning and therefore modifies the pedagogy. It appears that Finnish pre-school curriculum promotes the process quality factors and high-

quality learning opportunities (Mathers et al., 2014, 55; Munn, 2010, 1), including several independent play opportunities. Only 28% of the time was judged as teacher directed. The current curriculum was considered to be an amenable and flexible document which also accommodates children's wishes.

The next interview question wanted to learn teachers' opinions on play.

Table 22. *How Important – in Your Opinion – Is Learning through Play? Are You Able to Apply it in Your Teaching?*

Importance of learning through play		**Importance of learning through play**	
Category of Response	English Teachers (N=17) f	**Category of Response**	Finnish Teachers (N=20) f
Very important	14	Very important	20
Somewhat important	3	Somewhat important	
Able to apply play within children's learning	3	Able to apply play within children's learning	20
Able to apply play sometimes	9	n/a	
Not able to apply play within children's learning	5	n/a	

The final question was reflecting on the notion of *just playing*. According to research studies (Whitebread, 2013; Elkind, 2008b, 1; Moyles, 2005, 3) it is evident that play has been reduced in many English schools. Table 22 summarises both participant groups' views on play and whether they consider it possible to apply play-based pedagogy within the current curricula.

Despite the unfavourable position of play, 14 English teachers out of 17 considered play very important.

> *"There's just one word: vital."* – Claire –
>
> *"I think it's really, really important."* – Irene –
>
> *"Ahh…What options you are gonna give cause I'm just going to say very. I think it is really important. Yeah."* – Beth –

The English teachers mentioned the importance of play in supporting children's social and emotional skills, including their imagination. Play was also seen as strengthening children's friendships and helping with their problem-solving skills.

As stated in the literature review, research has pointed towards the benefits of various types of play in supporting and strengthening children's emotional self-regulation (Slot et al., 2017, 12; Lindsey and Colwell, 2013, 353) and contributing to problem solving and critical thinking (Andrews, 2015, 11). In addition, children's socio-emotional development is viewed as an important factor associated with school readiness.

> *"I think, learning through play is very important. I think it does develop lots of aspects of themselves that are important. Particularly friendships, problem solving, being able to solve quarrels. I think it's really, really useful."* – Penny –
>
> *"I think it is important. And I wish there were more time for it. Because they learn all the social skills, and everything as well. Armmm…to help in friendship's and be more confident in themselves. I think it makes them to be more inquisitive…engaging in their learning through play."* – Allison –
>
> *"Yeah, I do think it's very important. Especially, the first few years when they're learning their social skills and emotional skills. Ermmm…and just to get that imagination. I mean, I've seen some children that are in nursery and they can read, they can do writing, they can do their maths and…it's brilliant, but…they have no imagination. And it's very robotic and they can't…they've just missed out on that play, I think."* – Grace –

Teachers also made references to the children's age and gender and how young children would prefer to operate. In England, children are expected to be school ready at the age of six and be able to work in a formal school way. However, teachers felt that every child should be able to play and explore freely.

> *"I think it is very important. Hmm…because…well most of children don't want to be sat writing all day. And especially boys, they like to be out and about and learning and exploring themselves."* – Kelly –
>
> *"Oh, they still need play. They're so, they're also young. They need to play. They need to be kids. They don't…they don't need to be sat…at tables all the time."* – Fiona –

Teachers mentioned that children should enjoy what they are doing as it was seen as fundamental for their learning. Taking into consideration learning styles and employing learning by doing were mentioned as means of further embedding learning and making it more enjoyable. Diana described play as making things real for children. Via play children were understood to process and better

remember what they had learned, possibly making a significant impact on retaining knowledge.

> *"I think it imbeds their learning, it does. And it makes it real for the children. So, they can attach their learning, that process with playing. And it just makes it more real for them. It sets in context. Ermmm…so then hopefully they will remember that experience."* – Diana –

> *"Because…we are playful beings. And even as adults we are. But certainly, children are. So…even though you got all your different learning styles and things, none of, none of the learning styles are sitting and being talked at. Are they? So, you've got to learn, and you've got to do. And you got to enjoy, as well. You got to enjoy what you are doing. So, play is vital. We, everybody plays. All creatures play. But…we kind of squeeze that out…as the children get older."* – Claire –

Previously, in this research, the English teachers mentioned that some children are not mature enough and can be left behind, with the result that children can therefore turn off in respect to education and possibly view it negatively. Similarly, Palmer (2009, 7) mentioned that early formal curriculum can destroy a child's confidence in learning and possibly trigger mental health issues. Consequently, teachers felt that when applying play to the lessons it might help these children to come around and start enjoying their learning again.

> *"Cause it gets them excited about it…and…they're enjoying it… it makes them realise that actually learning is not a bad thing (laughing). Those ones that are being a bit more left behind, I can really see that it would help them a lot. And the more immature ones, definitely. Because that's what they want to be doing. You can see that's what they are thinking about. They talk about it; playtime we're gonna do this. So, doing it in that way for them…would probably make a big difference. They'd probably help them ability wise. And for some of them, because they've got low self-confidence if they then almost don't know they're learning, cause they're playing. That'd help them as well and that way. Yeah."* – Melissa –

Only three English teachers felt that in the current curriculum they are able to teach using various play methods. It could be here noted that the following spread in answers was perhaps influenced by teachers' varying knowledge of different learning styles and their varying understandings of play.

> *"I feel like…they are doing it through play as much as I can. Like I was saying before I've tried to do that, because, I think, you know, it's not, how it is, is it? To sit there and dictate and…get them to recite things. So…I do,*

yeah, I do feel like, I do it through play, especially at this age, yeah." – Grace –

"Yes. Yeah, I think so. We have done things like: role-play and drama, where the children got to act it out, and to dress up as the characters….there's not as much play in this year, as there has been previously." – Helen –

Whereas the majority (53%) of teachers felt they are able to apply play sometimes when teaching. The school environment was seen as formal and therefore not accommodating the use of play-based activities on a regular basis.

"Only sometimes. So, things like I will do role play with children… certainly most of my science, it's kind of exploratory learning through play. We've done history learning through play." – Beth –

"Sometimes. Ermmm…examples, like when they made the habitats outside. They were playing but they were learning…when we been able to, we'd try to put play-based experiences into Year 2. But it's been difficult…" – Emma –

"They do learn things through play. But I can't imagine it…having right in a structured school environment. And they do learn things through doing things, but I can't imagine…it is happening all the time." – Fiona –

Teachers felt that planning for play-based activities is difficult and there is not enough time for it. Additionally, academic requirements (SATs) were once again seen as the main obstacles preventing play opportunities Moreover, play was seen as problematic to apply when the subject targets were clearly outlined, and achievement requirements set. These findings corroborate the ideas of Basford and Bath (2014, 126), who suggested that assessments can dictate a teacher's pedagogy.

"Ermmm…we don't have enough time. We do role play...in terms of us having things for them to play with…it's very hard. It feels like it's only in Foundation Stage where there is the time and the freedom to do that." – Penny –

"You might be able to do, but I think it'll be a lot, I think it'll be difficult. It'll take an awful lot of work and when you've got…everything else that you are expected to do data wise and time wise it's probably very unlikely. But…not saying that it, it's impossible but it, yes, very difficult to. Yeah." – Melissa –

> *"…but as I said it comes more difficult as you're trying to get the children ready for their SAT's…it isn't always possible really."* – Nicole –
>
> *"Armmm… I think it is difficult to teach through play if you want to teach specific things…things you need to get done then…it's not gonna work through play. But for Year 2, I don't think it's possible."* – Allison –

Five of the participants felt that they are not able to utilise any play within the current curriculum. Whether or not to apply play might also reflect on how teachers perceive play. Lea, Julia and Claire – with a greater teaching experience – identified play as being part of the younger children's regime, no longer something for Year 2 children's interest.

> *"Not in Year 2…no…Hmm…Foundation is…more play based but it's not in Year 2."* – Lea –
>
> *"I think that's kind of aimed more towards Reception and Year 1, to be honest."* – Julia –
>
> *"I don't think they are (playing), no. I mean, we use props...but I'd say as a general rule over most of the topics, I would say: no...for what I've seen and what I gather, I would say…no."* – Claire –

Four of the English teachers expressed anxiety about occasionally using play in their everyday lessons. They felt worried about how to prove children's achievement to Ofsted or to the local authorities if the children would be seen as just playing. This view supports Wallerstedt and Pramling's (2012, 5) research wherein they stated that the concept of play is problematic and not entirely understood. There was also a genuine fear of Ofsted-visits. The expected SAT-test results were seen as directly influencing the teachers' pedagogy and how they choose their teaching methods. The teachers felt that the authorities would disapprove of their practise if they observed children just playing.

> *"I think it would be hard…to show how you're doing it. I think that's the hardest thing. I'd be confident that I'd be covering everything, I need to cover. But whether I'd be able to prove that to Ofsted or the governors. But, they're not just playing. That'd be the hard, that'd be the hardest thing."* – Irene –
>
> *"It's very difficult to prove you can…do some of the things on the curriculum by playing."* – Penny –

"I think it's the expectations and the…this fear of Ofsted as well. Because if we let them play, we're not totally in control, are we? Not totally." – Claire –

"Because we've got to worry about Ofsted as well. If they come in and we are not doing what we should be doing. That's also a concern for us. Ermmm…I do worry that…it…if Ofsted see…us doing something that they don't like, and they say: 'It's not right', that has an effect on us as teachers. And because of that, that affects how we teach…ermmm…rather than being able to concentrate completely on what we would like to do to children. We have to think about this as well." – Emma –

As stated in the literature review, teachers with less teaching experience felt also that they might lose control if letting children play. They perceived children possibly creating chaos and therefore possibly leading to an uncontrolled situation in formal settings.

"Ermmm…I don't know. I think it would be…my class find it very difficult to do anything like that. It's like they can't cope without the boundary. Ermmm…and I think they learn things through doing prac…things practically. But when they play…they just…it's like carnage…it's like chaos. And I think because I haven't experienced it enough. It's hard to imagine. And as a teacher it would scare me…to do it (laughing)." – Fiona – [1-2 years of teaching experience]

Teachers with more years of teaching experience acknowledged the possibilities in play but feel frustrated because they cannot apply it. Wallerstedt and Pramling (2012, 5) stated that when pedagogy is goal-directed within the curriculum guidelines it might create a dilemma for the teachers.

"I think it's, it's, it's really…it's frustrating as well. It's, it's really is really sad for the children. It's frustrating for us. And if, you know, if you know that something works but you can't do it…then, then that's frustrating…I can actually just see that things are going to progressively get worse. Which is quite… scary and also quite sad." – Claire – (over 10 years of teaching experience)

"An active way of learning is more productive than passive way of learning… if you just sat with somebody telling you or you got a really boring activity to do. You just gonna get it done, leave it and…you are not inspired in anyway. You are not gonna use it other contexts. You just…well she asked me to do that, I've done it. Now I can go and do what I really want to do." – Diana – (over 10 years of teaching experience)

Majority of the English teachers acknowledged the importance of play and wished there was more time for play. My findings are in keeping with a report by the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) (2013, 1) which stated that 58% of teachers felt there should be "greater emphasis on play in England." Especially, the importance of a variety of types of play was regarded as furthering the development of children's social and emotional skills, promoting imagination, strengthening peer relationships and fostering problem-solving skills. Teachers felt that particularly immature boys would benefit by play and all children should be able to play and explore freely. Play-based activities might also benefit children who have fallen behind their peers and view their education negatively. Teachers believed that children remember information better when they enjoy learning and are motivated.

Over half of the English participants employed play occasionally when teaching. However, several teachers experienced play as difficult to practice consistently due to lack of time for planning the activities, standard academic requirements and the national testing system. No more than three of participants were able to apply play-based learning to a great extent. As stated earlier, current curriculum targets and accountability might be part of the reason that the practised daily pedagogy is lacking play-based opportunities. Other reasons might include the inspection framework (Ofsted) and teachers' cautious reaction to it. Finally, teachers' deficient understanding of play and its positive impact on learning could be contributing factors.

In respect to the formal school environment, four of the English teachers said that they would not know how to defend or reason upon the use of play should Ofsted or the local authorities request an explanation. The teachers felt that the authorities would disapprove of their decisions and see children as just playing. Therefore, it can be concluded that Ofsted and curriculum are contributing to the diminishment of play in the English classroom. Teachers were also unsure if they would be able to deliver the specified outcomes if play would be taken as a viable option. Experienced teachers were more confident about the positive effects of play but felt frustrated because they were unable to apply it.

Five of the participants felt that they are not able to utilise any play within the current curriculum. Some experienced teachers also understood that play is for younger children and not part of Year 2 children's school day. Furthermore, playing children were considered as creating chaos and questioning teachers' authority.

The following is analysis of the Finnish teachers' views on the current pre-school curriculum and whether the participants felt they are able to utilise play within the pedagogy.

Finnish pre-school curriculum (FNBE, 2016, 20) stipulates children's right to learn through play and to experience joy in learning. Therefore, it perhaps comes as no surprise that all of the sample's Finnish teachers felt that play is extremely important.

> *"No sehän on tosi tärkeetä. Se on se lähtökohta*." – Venla –
>
> *"Well that's really important. That's the starting point."*
>
> *"Se on tosi tärkee asia, että niinhän se pitäs täällä ollakin. Lasten kanssa ollaan toimimassa ja että se leikki on se jonka avulla opitaan."* – Taina –
>
> *"It's a really important thing and that's how it should be. We are engaged with children and playing is their vehicle for learning."*

The Finnish teachers saw play as supporting children's natural (developmental) way of learning. The following statements reflect Moyles' (2005, 3) prescription that most children "have a natural inclination to play" with reference to a possible "play gene" in human beings (Sutton-Smith, 2001, 231).

> *"Koska...leikki on semmonen luontainen tapa lapsien oppia."* – Veera –
>
> *"Because...play is a natural way for children to learn."*
>
> *"No koska sen kautta niinkun opitaan niin monia taitoja...ja jotenkin kumminkin se on niin luontaista se leikki lapselle."* – Riitta –
>
> *"Well because that's how so many skills are learned...and somehow playing is so natural for the child."*

Finnish teachers mentioned several reasons why play was seen as topmost in children's learning. Participants perceived children in play developing their school readiness skills, imagination, creativity, self-regulation and academic skills.

> *"No siinä (leikissä) oppii nimenomaan niitä ryhmässä toimimisen taitoja, toisen huomioon ottamista. Juuri näitä tämmösiä tärkeitä kouluvalmiuksia. Että ne niinku kehittyy sitten niinku hyvin hyvin paljon niinku siinä...ja mielikuvitus ja luovuus, kaikki tämmöset asiat niinku...kehittyy siinä leikin avulla."* – Ulla –
>
> *"Well, in that (play), one learns those group skills and how to take others into consideration. Exactly those important school readiness skills. Those will develop along the way very, very much...and imagination and creativity, all that sort of thing...develop through play."*
>
> *"Tota pelien kautta oppii vuorovaikutustaitoja ja pettymysten sietokykyä ja ja tietenkin sitte näitä matemaattisia valmiuksia myös."* – Venla –
>
> *"Hmmm...playing games, you learn interaction skills and how to deal with frustrations and of course, the maths skills as well."*
>
> *"No kaikkia elämä taitoja. Siinä harjotellaan mun mielestä kaikkia taitoja mitä nyt elämässä tarvitaan*." – Senja –
>
> *"Well, all the life skills. In my opinion, one practices all the skills needed in life."*
>
> *"Siinä tulee taas ne niinku ne vuorovaikutustaidot ja jakamiset ja muiden huomiointi. Mutta sitte just se, että siihen voidaan myös laittaa ne kaikki matemaattiset ja äidinkielen. Ne on aika niinkun rajattomat ne mahdollisuudet siinä. Että tota...en mää oikeestaan nää, että mitä niin ku ei vois opettaa leikin kautta."* – Riitta –
>
> *"Along with it comes those interpersonal skills and sharing and the consideration of others. But then also, just the fact that you can put in all those maths and language skills. It has pretty much limitless possibilities. Well...hmmm...I don't really see what you can't teach through play."*

Certainly, the literature proposes that play is a valuable and important practise for learning (Alexander, et al., 2014, 1329). Similarly, the Finnish teachers believed that when children participate enthusiastically in their play it stimulates their learning. Teachers deemed that due to play, children's learning is almost like a by-product: they do not knowingly realise that they are learning.

> *"Mun mielestä se on tosi tärkeetä...ja se oppiminen tulee vähän niinkun...siinä sivussa, et ne ei tajuakaan sitä itte."* – Oona –
>
> *"I think it's really important...and learning comes a bit like...on the side, so that they don't realise it themselves."*

“Kyllähän lapset niinkun oppii sitä maailmaa sen leikin kautta, että kyllähän se välineenä on ihan oiva...käyttää edelleenkin. Että mikä sen parempaa ku et jos leikkiessä oppii. Että...leikkiä käytetään ja sen lisäks myös siis sitä tekemällä oppimista. Koska se on hirveen mielekäs tapa lapsillekin oppia.” – Pauliina –

“Children do learn the world through play. It is definitely a great tool....to practise. There really isn’t a better way if you learn whilst playing. Consequently...applying play and in addition to that, learning by doing. Because it is a terribly meaningful way for children to learn.”

“Mä jotenkin mielellän sen leikin semmoseen hyvään oloon, mielenkiintoon. Et ne ei välttämättä ole ihan synonyymejä, mutta totta meillä tulee se oppiminen sitä kautta, että kun lapsi on kiinnostunut jostain niin sen hän haluaa oppia ja opetella. Se työskentely on, täytyy olla mielekästä. Ja leikihän on se mikä laps haluaa ottaa ja tehdä, niin kyllä se mielekkyys täytyy olla siinä työssä, jotta lapsi oppii.” – Birgitta –

“Somehow, I think of play as like a good feeling, an interest. Maybe not synonymous with each other, but it is true we learn through our interest. When a child is interested in something, he or she wants to study and learn. Their work must be meaningful. And play is what a child wants to choose and do, so that meaningfulness must be in that work so that they learn.”

“Leikin avulla pystyy...opettammaan niitä myös vähä niinkö salaa (naurua) ettei ne lapset huomaakaan, että jotaki opetellaan, esimerkiksi joku kauppaleikki.” – Leena –

“Using play, you can…teach them kind of in secret (laughter) so that those children will not even notice that something has been learnt, for example, playing shop.”

Children were seen as very young by Finnish teachers and needing play and playful situations.

“Kyllähän ne hirveesti tarttee sitä leikkiä vielä. Todella palio.” – Leena –

“Sure, sure, they really still need play. Very much.”

“Erittäin tärkeänä. Se on kuitenkin tämän ikäinen lapsi...se on niinku lapselle tosi tärkeä tää leikki, että koska tahansa kysyy, että mikä oli mukavinta, niin aina se on se leikkiminen mukavinta ja tutkiminen.” – Elisa –

“Very important. The child is of this age...the play is so important to the child, that whenever you ask what was the most enjoyable, the answer is always playing, the playing was most enjoyable, and exploring.”

“Kyllä se on eskari-iäsä vielä tosi tärkiää. Monesti kuuluu sitä, että tämänki ikäset, että: Millon me päästää leikkimään?” – Leena –

“Yes, it’s still really important for pre-school age. Many times, we hear it, even at this age. When do we get to play?”

Teachers also reflected on formal academic learning and felt it would not be successful.

“Ne on lapset sen ikäsiä, että leikin avulla opitaan parhaiten. Ei sillälailla, että istut tuolissa ja nyt näin, vaan leikkimällä.” – Jaana –

“These children are at the age where the best way to learn is playing. Not that you're to sit in a chair and that’s it but playing.”

“Nää on kuitenkin vielä kuuden vanhoja. Sillä tavalla pieniä, että se on niinku se tärkein se leikin avulla oppiminen ja...opettaminen ja se toiminnallisuus. Että ei pitkiä aikoja istuta viel paikallaan. Ja sitten se, että jää niinku riittävästi aikaa lapsilla päivässä siihen niinku ihan keskinäiseen leikkiin.” – Ulla –

“No matter what, they are still only six years old. Still little, in the way, that most important is learning through play and...teaching and learning by doing. No sitting still for long periods of time. And then too, there must be enough time in every day for the children to play freely.”

”Kuitenkin näilläkin on vielä semmonen rajallinen vastaanotto, että jos aattelis, että se ois kauheen koulumaista, niin eihän...en mää niinku jaksa uskoo, että nuo jaksas kauan. Että ko...joskus meidän kalenterituokio on aamulla aina niin huomaa, että...vaikka tuntus, että itellä ois vielä kauheesti asiaa tuntuu, että ei oo pakko kaikkia ottaa. Ne ei vaan vielä niinku jaksa ja tuntuu, että jos ne pääsee vähäksi aikaa leikimään, niin jaksaa keskittyä taas sitte.” – Katri –

“However, they still have limited reception, so if you think that it would be super school-like, then...I don't believe they could take it long. Our calendar time is in the morning and that...even though it feels like I still have a lot to talk about, I don't have to...you can't teach everything. They might just be tired, and I feel that if they have some time to play, they can concentrate again.”

The Finnish teachers felt that when children have personal experiences and they are involved in their actions, they find learning easier and remember things better. All of the participants employed play every day in the Finnish pre-school, and it was conceived to be the most suitable way of learning for six-year-old children.

“Mun mielestä isommatki lapset, niin tarvii...mielikuvia ja tekemällä...oppimista leikin kautta. Mutta et sitten jos ei sitä leikkiä tai

tekemistä tai kokeilua ole...niin...eihän se tue sitä niitten omaa ajattelua. Ne ei tee niitä oivalluksia, että miten ne niinku oppii...jos ne oppii vaan niinku jotenki mekaanisesti ulkoa sillai, että mää vaan niinku autoritäärisesti täältä sanon, että asiat on näin. Niin eihän päässä tapahu mitään semmosta oppimista sillon...tai joku kuuntelee ja joku ehkä...voi sieltä napata jotakin. Mut en mä siitä kauheen hyvänä koe. Enkä ittelleni ollenkaan (naurua). Pidän sen kovin vieraana. En vois kuvitellakaan, että päiväkodissa tai eskarissa ei niinku leikittäs omaehtoisesti..." – Veera –

"I think even bigger children...need mind images, and learning…by doing through play. But then if you don't have play or doing or experimenting...then...it doesn't support their own thinking. They don't get those insights about how they learn...if they learn something mechanically by heart, because I tell things as an authority and claim things are like that. Nothing happens in their head then...or somebody might listen, and somebody is maybe...able to grasp something from all this. But I don't feel this is a terribly good thing. And not for me, that's for sure (laughter). I consider it very alien. I couldn't imagine kindergarten or pre-school not playing like you want."

"Niin sit on tavallaan mun mielestä ihanaa, että täällä siihen (leikkiin) annetaan mahollisuus. Ja se, että ne on taitavia leikkijöitä, mutta tavallaan joillakin ne leikkitaidot voi olla kumminkin aika heikot...lapsi tarvii mallia siihen leikkimiseenkin ja sitä leikkimistäkin täytyy opettaa. Että se ei tuu kaikilla välttämättä niinku luonnostaan. Ja meillä on niin, että päivittäin on ainaki joku hetki. On aina semmonen, että on sitä vapaata leikkiä ja nimenomaan sellasta, että lapsi pystyy itte vaikuttaan, että mitä leikkiä hän haluaa leikkiä." – Senja –

"So then, in a way, I find it wonderful that we give them the opportunities (for play). And that children in fact are skilful in play, but, then, in a way, someone's play skills can be pretty poor...therefore, a child would need teaching and modelling on how to play. This may not come naturally to everyone. And we have it here every day at least at intervals, for a moment or two. There is always opportunity for free play, and specifically so, that the child is able to himself have an influence on what he wants to play."

The following is a summation of results for the final question that dealt with play's position in the six-year-old children's curriculum and whether the Finnish teachers felt they are able to practise play within the pre-school day. According to Finnish pre-school curriculum (FNBE, 2016, 20) children have the right to learn by playing and experience happiness related to their learning. All (100%) Finnish participants confirmed that play and its variations are practised every day in the Finnish pre-school. Clearly, play was seen as the most suitable way of learning for six-year-old children for these participants. Several reasons were stated supporting play as the natural way of developing children's school readiness skills, imagination,

creativity, self-regulation and academic skills. Whilst playing children are motivated, learning is easier, and they remember things better. All of which seems to occur automatically through play without conscious learning. Teachers considered six-year-olds still as very young learners needing those playful situations. Formal academic learning was not perceived to be appropriate or successful in the long run. Finnish teachers felt that play is the only suitable way of learning for six-year-old children.

The following section will summarise the English and Finnish teachers' views on children's school readiness, curriculum policy, pedagogy and its suitability for children aged six in England and Finland and lastly draws final conclusions on the findings.

Chapter VI - Conclusions

This study was designed and intended to reveal pedagogical impediments that educators encounter when and if the curriculum in question does not sufficiently take into account the natural development of children, when it is not determined by age-related goals and objectives.

Of course, the small sample size of the study sets limitations on the extent to which these results might be indicative of a larger population. However, the semi structured interviews supplementing the data, enriched the data, allowing the interviewees more active participation, thus providing new perceptions and expanding insights into the curriculum as practised.

There are obviously several important factors that should be considered when designing a curriculum for young children. Evaluating the qualitative data findings related to the education of six-year-olds, the following conclusions can be drawn.

The teachers in England communicate dissatisfaction with the curriculum they are currently putting into practise and feel that their professional judgments and skills are frustratingly limited by predetermined over-the-board academic demands, standard testing, and outside evaluation of their work.

The interview results from both countries strongly support the assertion that any given curriculum should encourage teachers in the field to practise creative education adapted to fit the needs of the group of children they are working with. The teachers from both countries expressed joy and satisfaction with situations in which they were able to use their own initiative and given the freedom to teach in accordance with their skills and insights.

Teachers in both countries acknowledged the fundamental role of play in building learning competences in a way that is natural to children of that age group. Most of the participating teachers were in agreement on the point that play-based curriculum should be an integral part of the school day.

The major focuses of the study were to discover how teachers' viewed school readiness, how they felt about the relationship between the curriculum and its impact on children, and whether or not they believed curriculum should and could promote teaching practices of learning through play.

The 17 English primary school teachers' understanding of school readiness was that at the age of five children should be able to work and function in a formal educational setting. This meant that the children should be prepared to learn the academic subjects that the national curriculum requires of children that age. This in turn influenced the actions of teachers, as most of the English teachers practicing in Reception and Year 1 were already orientated towards Year 2 tests, in other words influenced by future demands on older children.

The 20 Finnish pre-school teachers understood the concept of school readiness from a much different standpoint. The ability to acquire academic skills in a formal educational setting was not seen as synonymous with school readiness. Finnish teachers conceived that the pre-school year was about fostering children's physical and mental maturity and, in this manner, helping them to function in later school life. Furthermore, Finnish teachers emphasised how important it is for the children to master self-regulation and how these self-regulation skills were essential to later academic achievement.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this study therefore provide additional information on the meanings and consequences of "schoolification" (Ring et al., 2017) and clarify the question of whether or not children should begin formal, academic-style education at an early age. One might also draw tentative conclusions on the lasting effects of play and group learning in early education into adult life.

Over a decade ago, Pink (2008, 2) claimed that the future is in need of people who can respond to the growing demand for skills and knowledge that cannot be outsourced or quantified; skills such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence, communication, collaboration and creativity. It was then understood that any young children's curriculum should promote children's curiosity, imagination and creativity.

As testified to in this study's literature review, a formal curriculum instituted at too early a developmental stage can destroy a child's confidence in learning (Montroy et al., 2014). Therefore, children's developmental foundations and especially their self-regulation skills need to be well in place before moving on to higher curriculum demands. Experienced teachers from both countries were deeply concerned about less mature children. A number of studies confirm that even small differences in academic achievement at an early age grow into large differences, making it harder and harder for a child to catch up (Duncan and Magnuson, 2005; Janus and Offord, 2007; Lamy, 2013 and Burchinal, 2018). The eventual result can be serious indeed; achievement gaps between children and growing differentiation among socioeconomic groups.

The logical conclusion to be drawn from all of the above would be to incorporate a system resembling that presently practised in Finland, wherein to promote genuine and joyful learning with long-lasting effects young children are involved in playful situations up until seven years of age. These situations often involve group work, creativity, discovery and exploration in the out-of-doors. In connection with these activities, children are enabled to acquire social skills, use their imagination, and actively participate in their own learning.

This conclusion is supported by the responses of both the English and Finnish teachers. Finnish teachers responded that *all* children are ready to move on in their education. In contrast the majority of English teachers judged that *the majority* of Year 2 children are ready to move into the next year group, but not all. The repercussions of this possibly being that those children may end up struggling throughout their educational journey.

In addition to the question of school readiness and success in school, this study also touched upon teacher satisfaction with their work; how enjoyable it was to them and how long they continued in the profession. In Finland despite the fact that teachers' statutory salaries are below the OECD average, Finnish teachers like being teachers (OECD, 2019b, 1) Furthermore, Finnish teachers evaluate their work-life balance and flexibility at work as high (OECD, 2019b, 1). Very significantly the Finnish government demonstrates a high degree of trust in their teaching workforce. All of the Finnish teachers responded that there are no

limitations on how they plan or deliver the curriculum. It appears that the curriculum allows teachers to create motivating lessons, apply their judgement and be creative. Just as important to teacher satisfaction is the fact that in Finland curriculum is adaptable at the local level. Teachers are granted a great deal of control based upon their own personal strengths and knowledge, as well as acknowledging the needs of their own pupils. It is then perhaps not so surprising that teachers in Finland report a high level of job satisfaction.

In contrast approximately one third of the English teachers strongly believed that the curriculum hinders them in practising engaging and motivating classes for the children. Thus, it appears that if curriculum adopts a directional approach controlled largely through testing and accountability, it will constrain teachers' creative pedagogical approach. This in turn will negatively effect on teachers' job satisfaction and reduce the span of their teaching careers. This conclusion is supported by a survey revealing that 43% of English teachers were at the present moment considering leaving their profession (Lightfoot, 2016, n/a).

All of which would tend towards the conclusion that a curriculum in which the teachers are able to be actively involved, which provides for local and individual adaptation, and which expresses a government's trust in its professionals, could lead to improved job satisfaction, more creativity, and better educational achievement opportunities for all children.

Even a very superficial glance at the internet reveals what skills and types of knowledge many employers and organizations are searching for in the modern world. The types of knowledge required in today's world are undergoing constant change. An ability for lifelong learning is an ever-increasing demand. Though the concept of lifelong learning is amorphously and variously defined, nonetheless the underlying idea is clear.

A lifelong learner is an ever-active learner, of his own volition committed to learning new skills and acquiring new knowledge. In order to become a lifelong learner, one should have at some stage acquired self-confidence in learning, and a feeling of joy and satisfaction in learning. Thus, the need for lifelong learners in the modern world closely corresponds to the use of play in learning upon which the present-day Finnish curriculum is based. In addition, the most important

learning evaluation framework in Finnish preschool is the child's Pre-school Learning Plan (PLP) which is negotiated together with the parents/carers and involves the child's own participation. Hence, at an early age the individual's own self-evaluation is already a part of his learning process, signifying the importance of the child in the learning process and promoting further development and learning. The conclusion being that a person who at an early age is being involved in his own education, more readily becomes a lifelong learner.

As the reader perhaps recalls, Lev Vygotsky's social learning theory (1934/1978), or at least his name, was among the most familiar to both English and Finnish preschool teachers. An application related to Vygotsky's theory of social learning was mentioned in the above study, as the teacher in Finland set the children, working together, to collect the pieces of yarn representing the poor Mama caterpillar's lost babies. This kind of learning method is closely related to the concept of collaborative learning much required in the modern work force and the world at large. This collaborative learning, stressing social skills and working together with others has been shown in this study to be one of the most oft-employed educational practices for preschool learners in Finland.

The conclusion being that though lifelong learning and collaborative learning are ideas expressed and skills demanded in the modern world, and perhaps even more so in an increasingly international world, they are at the same time skills that can and should be aroused at a very early age in preschool education. So that the learner experiences himself as an active learner, a joyful learner, and as a learner with the social skills required for working with others and discovering solutions to mutual problems.

There exists a belief among educational policy holders that if children start early, they will do better later. This is possibly true. But what is it they should start out early on and how should children start out? What are the methods and practises and government policies concerning preschool and school curricula which best support the well-being of the individual child and correspond to the requirements of both the present-day and future society?

This study was sharply focused and involved relatively small numbers of correspondents but has generated interesting data and raised important questions

concerning early education, particularly in England, and points to conclusions worthy of consideration.

6.1 Practical Implications

These findings have contributed to the knowledge of six-year-olds' curricula practises in England and Finland. The scope of the study is limited by the small number of participants. However, the findings could reveal meaningful practical implications when re-thinking young children's curriculum reforms. According to Brotherus (2004, 282)

> "The 6-year-old is still a playful child, but he or she is also a learning child, who needs a lot of diverse challenges, including intellectual efforts. The preschool child wants to play and learn, he wants to learn different skills and knowledge, including more challenging work. What inspires the child are activities with a purpose he or she understands, and which involve challenges and fantasy." (Brotherus, 2004, 282)

This statement by Brotherus (2004) highlights the connection to my research findings, thus indicating that the child ought to be the main focus when reforming education. This study's analysed data could propose practical policy implication on the perception that young children's curriculum should respond to children's developmental maturity instead of their chronological age. Governments and policy makers might benefit from reflecting on age related curriculum practises instead of, or in addition to, enumerating high educational targets. Furthermore, it could be proposed that the uses of compulsory testing could be reconsidered in light of its possible effects on teachers' pedagogical choices and the reduction of children's play opportunities.

In addition, these small-scale study findings could point out subjects for further educational research, which has often viewed the concept of school readiness as of relatively minor importance for children just beginning their education. For example, play has been seen as ending when the child starts school and therefore it might often not be an integral part of pedagogical practises. The

questions could be raised whether curricula need to be better adapted to children's developmental needs or their abilities at this age, as highlight in the results from English teachers who doubt the current reliability of the targets that exist now.

6.2 Validity and Reliability

Participant structure was based on 37 teacher's short questionnaires and semi-structured interviews; therefore, I understand that the results provided do have limitations, and this study does not claim to be characteristic of a larger sample. This research could be classed as a small-scale study. Therefore, a number of important limitations need to be considered.

Firstly, to fulfil the quality criteria for this study it would secure its position better if conducted with a wider number of participants, including male teachers as well (Burton et al., 2014, 206). Involving broader sample size would have also reduced bias and increase accuracy.

The second limitation is the participants options with the questionnaire's gender categories, which could be further reflected. There are individuals who, for example, were born one gender but identify as another and similarly there are some individuals who wish to be identified as non-binary. I understand that this question may in fact cause some distress to participants who might not fit into one of the two categories of being either male or female, and I will amend this question to be more inclusive in any further research.

The third limitation is that the current investigation was restricted to specific geographical areas. Teachers' views might have differed of teaching in the small rural school and between urban setting. Consequently, the study would benefit by additional participants from varying parts of England and Finland. Therefore, with a small sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be transferable to create reliable generalisability in this case. However, both research

methods are easy to replicate to a wider population. This would extend the validity outcomes for this research.

The fourth limitation is that there was limited discussion of what interviewees meant by school readiness. The difference between teachers' personal philosophies of teaching and learning and the school readiness expectation might have yield interesting viewpoints. Therefore, deeper investigations could have revealed differing cultural perspectives between teachers and how teachers' characteristics might have influenced their opinions about school readiness.

In spite of the listed limitations, this study has produced outcomes that meet the agreed objectives. The semi-structured interview data reached the saturation point fairly quickly with both participant groups. One way of fulfilling the instrument criterion of reliability was to present data's consistency – saturation point – in percentages as well as the actual participant numbers in tables. These were listed in the beginning of the data analysis chapters for easy access and convenience.

Another reason to demonstrate good validity, in this study, was the conducted pilot study before the actual data gathering. The pilot study gave me valuable feedback and opportunity to reconsider certain questions again. This increased the accuracy of the chosen instrument for this study (Gibson and Brown, 2009, 55).

The final validity and reliability to be considered, was the participants preconceptions and suppositions which can impact on the given responses (King and Horrocks, 2011, 12). Recent developments in curricular reform combined with information reported on social media might well have influenced the opinions expressed by the teachers, especially considering how controversial an issue curriculum has become in England. Therefore, a small number of teachers may have been already provoked by the media, and through interviews they were able to correct it and discharge. Therefore, the provided answers might have been subjective in their nature. Furthermore, it is pointed out that "people participate in indeterminate lifeworlds, often attaching different interpretations and meanings to seemingly similar 'facts' and events" (King and Horrocks, 2011, 11). Then again, I do recognise that English teachers genuinely wished that the curricula would change and improve in the future and therefore I count their responses to be

trustworthy and honest. To increase the reliability of the research, I included direct quotations from the participants. The direct quotations are used as an evidence to support my claims and substantiate the choices leading to an argument and validation here.

This study's outcomes were also enhanced with teachers' background questionnaires and aimed to strengthen the triangulation. The given responses showed that several teachers could not remember their curriculum modules. Therefore, I consider that the wider number of participants could have provided a clearer validity for this question and their responses linked to find out whether teachers' views of similar curriculum modules, such as, play are related.

Overall, participants responses measured well to presented research questions in this study and most of the teachers were eager to talk. The chosen methods corresponded well to the semi-structured interview questions and gave me freedom to clarify answers if needed. Teachers' responses produced rich, valid data which I felt comfortable with and easy to analyse. The reason might, again, be my multicultural knowledge and experiences on the topic. In addition, the descriptive coding scheme – verbatim – kept me close to data and helped me to focus on the significant themes and emerging topics straight from the beginning. In order to ensure the reliability of the research, direct quotations from the participants were included.

6.3 Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study set out to determine the perceptions of teachers in England and Finland as to how recent curricular reform in both countries has impacted children's school readiness and influenced pedagogical practice. These findings enhance our understanding of the importance of the age appropriate curricula and how it is practised in these two different contexts. This research has thrown up many questions and, therefore, the recommendations and suggestions could be beneficial to consider in the education of young children also in other countries.

Consequently, I aim to provide recommendations that *further research and development* could be undertaken in the following six areas.

80% of Finnish teachers felt that during the pre-school year children should gain strong self-image, confidence and coping skills before they start year one. Finnish pre-school curriculum's target is to support a positive self-image in children and to ensure that each child gains experiences in successful learning (FNBE, 2016, 59). Finnish teachers also mentioned that their aim is to empower children to believe that they are good learners. Whether children face difficulties with their learning later, they should have gained coping mechanisms to overcome these and are therefore confident enough to deal with them in the future. Therefore, *firstly*, I would recommend developmentally appropriate pedagogical practises so that the children gain these successful educational learning experiences, learning-to-learn skills and therefore feel genuinely ready for the higher academic curriculum challenges later.

The second recommendation is allowing extra time for maturation and children's holistic growth. Granting additional time would possibly close some of the achievement gaps and level the school readiness skills in the beginning of the school journey. As stated by Sahlberg (2011, 5). "No other country has so little variation in outcomes between schools, and the gap within schools between the top and bottom-achieving students is modest as well." In Finland children start their year 1 at the age of seven and therefore this might be one of the reasons for Finnish teachers' assertiveness and trust that the children are genuinely ready for school. Children are empowered with the knowledge of learning-to-learn, high self-esteem and different learning styles. These facilitate children to be mentally and physically prepared to start their school journey.

Thirdly, I would also recommend lowering the curriculum targets. English teachers' statements supported the existing research evidence of teaching young children more demanding curriculum. The participants' statements commented that quite often children do not fully understand some of the concepts or they are forgetting their learning after a while. Comprehensive research is needed to determine how children would benefit specifically from the phenomenon-based learning. Furthermore, English teachers' answers suggested that underachieving

children would still benefit by play-based pedagogy longer. Further experimental investigations are needed to estimate the importance of unhurried play-based curriculum with the older children.

The fourth recommendation would be giving the children: a voice to be heard. Any child should have the feeling that he or she is important, and they have power to influence their learning. This would increase social justice and make schooling a resource for children's rights rather than a violation of them (CRC) (UNICEF) (2013). Further research is required to determine how young children experience their education.

The fifth recommendation would be to end the SAT-tests. This would help teachers to focus on wider curriculum without the subject's narrowness or teaching for the test and avoiding the fear of test results. The children would benefit by learning without anxiety and therefore this should lead to better mental health. Abolishing the SAT-test would also help with teachers' and parents' worries about children's wellbeing, self-esteem and possible disengagement with their learning (Weale, 2017, n/a; Frans et al., 2019, 15-16) Therefore, further investigation and experimentation into simpler testing are suggested, that further consideration of the appropriateness of SATs tests should be made and it should be explored whether these are useful or not.

The sixth recommendation would be a reduction in the class sizes. According to OECD (2019a, 4), England has one of the largest class sizes in OECD countries. Research into reducing the pupils' class size and its effects – especially in the primary years – is recommended. Earlier research has concluded that the smaller class sizes engage children with higher levels of instruction and reduce unwanted behaviour (Blatchford et al., 2011, 725; Magnuson et al. 2007a, 33).

Finally, the concept of 'school readiness' and its relation to curriculum design in both England and Finland is an intriguing one, which it would be rewarding to explore further in research and practice.

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8 Appendices

Appendix 1

High Scope: A Constructivist Approach

The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation is a non-profit organization that sponsors and supports the High/Scope educational approach. The program is based on Piaget's intellectual development theory. High/Scope provides broad, realistic educational experiences geared to children's current stages of development, to promote the constructive processes of learning necessary to broaden emerging intellectual and social skills (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1989).

High/Scope is based on three fundamental principles:

- Active participation of children in choosing, organizing, and evaluating learning activities, which are undertaken with careful teacher observation and guidance in a learning environment replete with a rich variety of materials located in various classroom learning centers
- Regular daily planning by the teaching staff in accord with a developmentally based curriculum model and careful child observations
- Developmentally sequenced goals and materials for children based on the High/Scope "key experiences" (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1989)

Basic Principles and Goals of the High/Scope Approach

The High/Scope program strives to develop in children a broad range of skills, including the problem solving, interpersonal, and communication skills that are essential for successful living in a rapidly changing society. The curriculum encourages student initiative by providing children with materials, equipment, and time to pursue activities they choose. At the same time, it provides teachers with a framework for guiding children's independent activities toward sequenced learning goals.

The teacher plays a key role in instructional activities by selecting appropriate, developmentally sequenced material and by encouraging children to adopt an active problem-solving approach to learning....This teacher-student interaction—teachers helping students achieve developmentally sequenced goals while also encouraging them to set many of their own goals—uniquely distinguishes the High/Scope Curriculum from direct instruction and child-centered curricula (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1989).

The High/Scope approach influences the arrangement of the classroom, the manner in which teachers interact with children, and the methods employed to assess children.

The Five Elements of the High/Scope Approach

Teachers create the context for learning in the High/Scope approach by implementing and supporting five essential elements: active learning, classroom arrangement, the daily schedule, assessment, and the curriculum (content).

Active Learning

The idea that children are the source of their own learning forms the center of the High/Scope curriculum. Teachers support children's active learning by providing a variety of materials, making plans and reviewing activities with children, interacting with and carefully observing individual children, and leading small- and large-group active learning activities.

Classroom Arrangement

The classroom arrangement invites children to engage in personal, meaningful, educational experiences. In addition, the classroom contains three or more interest areas that encourage choice. The classroom organization of materials and equipment supports the daily routine—children know where to find materials and what materials they can use. This encourages development of self-direction and independence.

The teacher selects the centers and activities to use in the classroom based on several considerations:

- Interests of the children (e.g., kindergarten children are interested in blocks, housekeeping, and art)
- Opportunities for facilitating active involvement in seriation, number, time relations, classification, spatial relations, and language development
- Opportunities for reinforcing needed skills and concepts and functional use of those skills and concepts

Arranging the environment, then, is essential to implementing a program's philosophy. This is true for Montessori, High/Scope, and every other program.

Daily Schedule

The schedule considers developmental levels of children, incorporates a sixty- to seventy-minute plan-do-review process, provides for content areas, is as consistent throughout the day as possible, and contains a minimum number of transitions.

The plan-do-review process is an important part of the High/Scope approach and is one worthy of your particular attention. The plan-do-review is a sequence in which children, with the help of the teacher, initiate plans for projects or activities; work in learning centers to implement their plans; and then review what they have done with the teacher and their fellow classmates.

Assessment

Teachers keep notes about significant behaviors, changes, statements, and things that help them better understand a child's way of thinking and learning. Teachers use two mechanisms to help them collect data: the key experiences note form and a portfolio. The High/Scope Child Observation Record is also used to assess children's development.

Curriculum

The High/Scope curriculum comes from two sources: children's interests and the key experiences, which are lists of observable learning behaviors. Basing a curriculum in part on children's interests is very constructivist and implements the philosophies of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky.

A Daily Routine That Supports Active Learning

The High/Scope curriculum's daily routine is made up of a plan-do-review sequence and several additional elements. The plan-do-review sequence gives children opportunities to express intentions about their activities while keeping the teacher intimately involved in the whole process. The following five processes support the daily routine and contribute to its successful functioning.

Planning Time

Planning time gives children a structured, consistent chance to express their ideas to adults and to see themselves as individuals who can act on decisions. They experience the power of independence and are conscious of their intentions. This supports the development of purpose and confidence.

The teacher talks with children about the plans they have made before the children carry them out. This helps children clarify their ideas and think about how to proceed. Talking with children about their plans provides an opportunity for the teacher to encourage and respond to each child's ideas, to suggest way to strengthen the plans so they will be successful, and to understand and gauge each child's level of development and thinking style. Children and teachers benefit from these conversations and reflections. Children feel reinforced and ready to start their work, and teachers have ideas of what opportunities for extension might arise, what difficulties children might have, and where problem solving may be needed. In such a classroom, children and teachers are playing appropriate and important roles.

Key Experiences

Teachers continually encourage and support children's interests and involvement in activities that occur within an organized environment and a consistent routine. Teachers plan for key experiences that may broaden and strengthen children's emerging abilities. Children generate many of these experiences on their own;

others require teacher guidance. Many key experiences are natural extensions of children's projects and interests.

Work Time

This part of the plan-do-review sequence is generally the longest time period in the daily routine. The teacher's role during work time is to observe children to see how they gather information, interact with peers, and solve problems, and when appropriate, teachers enter into the children's activities to encourage, extend, and set up problem-solving situations.

Clean up Time

During clean up time, children return materials and equipment to their labelled places and store their incomplete projects, restoring order to the classroom. All children's materials in the classroom are within reach and on open shelves. Clear labelling enables children to return all work materials to their appropriate places.

Recall Time

Recall time, the final phase of the plan-do-review sequence, is the time when children represent their work-time experience in a variety of developmentally appropriate ways. They might recall the names of the children they involved in their plan, draw a picture of the building they made, or describe the problems they encountered. Recall strategies include drawing pictures, making models, physically demonstrating how a plan was carried out, or verbally recalling the events of work time. The teacher supports children's linking of the actual work to their original plan.

This review permits children to reflect on what they did and how it was done. It brings closure to children's planning and work-time activities. Putting their ideas and experiences into words also facilitates children's language development. Most important, it enables children to represent to others their mental schemes.

Providing for Diversity and Disability

The High/Scope curriculum is a developmentally appropriate approach that is child centered and promotes active learning. The use of learning centers, active learning, and the plan-do-review cycle, as well as allowing children to progress at their own pace, provides for children's individual and special needs. High/Scope teachers emphasize the broad cognitive, social, and physical abilities that are important for all children, instead of focusing on a child's deficits. High/Scope teachers identify where a child is developmentally and then provide a rich range of experiences appropriate for that level. For example, they would encourage a four-year-old who is functioning at a two-year-old level to express his or her plans by pointing, gesturing, and saying single words, and they would immerse the child in a conversational environment that provided many natural opportunities for using and hearing language

(Educational Programs: Early Childhood, 2007).

Many early childhood programs for children with special needs incorporate the High/Scope approach. For example, the Regional Early Childhood Center at Rockburn Elementary School in Elkridge, Maryland, operates a full-day multiple-intense-needs class for children with disabilities and typically developing peers and uses the High/Scope approach. The daily routine includes greeting time, small groups (e.g., art, sensory, preacademics), planning time (i.e., picking a center), work time at the centers, clean up time, recall (i.e., discussing where they "worked"), snacks, circle time with stories, movement and music, and outside time (Regional Early Childhood Center, 2007).

Further Thoughts

The High/Scope approach represents one approach to educating young children. Whereas Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf are European based in philosophy and context, High/Scope puts into practice the learning-by-doing American philosophy. It builds on Dewey's ideas of active learning and teaching in the context of children's interests.

High/Scope is widely used in Head Start and early childhood programs across the United States; High/Scope research has demonstrated that its approach is compatible with Head Start guidelines and performance standards.

There are number of advantages to implementing the High/Scope approach:

It offers a method for implementing a constructivist-based program that has its roots in Dewey's philosophy and Piagetian cognitive theory.

It is widely popular and has been extensively researched and tested.

There is a vast network of teacher training and support provided by the High/Scope Foundation.

It is research based and it works.

As a result, the High/Scope approach is viewed by early childhood practitioners as one that implements many of the best practices embraced by the profession.

Morrison, G.S. (2017) *Early childhood education today*. Available from https://highscope.org/preschool [accessed 16 January 2018].

Appendix 2

Key stages: *The National Curriculum is organised into blocks of years called 'key stages' (KS). At the end of each key stage, the teacher will formally assess your child's performance.*

Age	Year	Key stage	Assessment
3 to 4		Early years	
4 to 5	Reception	Early years	Teacher assessments (there's also an optional assessment at the start of the year)
5 to 6	Year 1	KS1	Phonics Screening Check
6 to 7	Year 2	KS1	National tests and teacher assessments in English, maths and science

DfE (2015) *The National Curriculum*. Available from https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum [Accessed 7 August 2019].

a) the assessment results should give direct information about pupils' achievement in relation to objectives: they should be criterion-referenced;

b) the results should provide a basis for decisions about pupils' further learning needs: they should be formative;

c) the scales or grades should be capable of comparison across classes and schools, if teachers, pupils and parents are to share a common language and common standards: so the assessments should be calibrated or moderated;

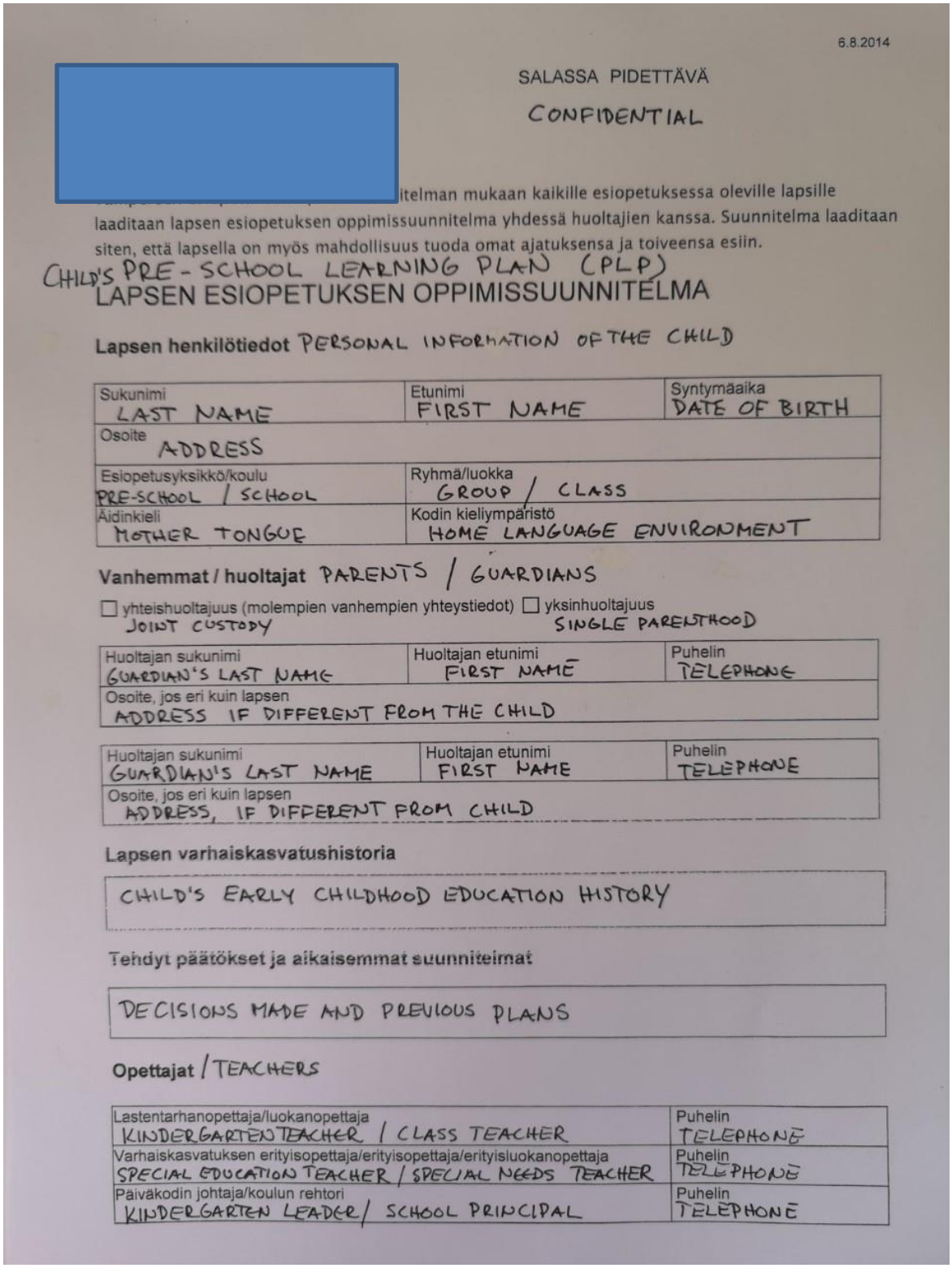
d) the ways in which criteria and scales are set up and used should relate to expected routes of educational development, giving some continuity to a pupil's assessment at different ages: the assessments should relate to progression.

Appendix 3

Figure 1 – Structure of the national curriculum

	Key stage 1	Key stage 2	Key stage 3	Key stage 4
Age	5 – 7	7 – 11	11 – 14	14 – 16
Year groups	1 – 2	3 – 6	7 – 9	10 – 11
Core subjects				
English	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mathematics	✓	✓	✓	✓
Science	✓	✓	✓	✓
Foundation subjects				
Art and design	✓	✓	✓	
Citizenship			✓	✓
Computing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Design and technology	✓	✓	✓	
Languages[4]		✓	✓	
Geography	✓	✓	✓	
History	✓	✓	✓	
Music	✓	✓	✓	
Physical education	✓	✓	✓	✓

Department for Education (2014a) *Statutory Guidance. National Curriculum in England: Framework for Key Stages 1 to 4*. Available from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4/the-national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4#the-school-curriculum-in-england [Accessed 9 June 2018].



6.8.2014

SALASSA PIDETTÄVÄ

CONFIDENTIAL

[redacted]itelman mukaan kaikille esiopetuksessa oleville lapsille laaditaan lapsen esiopetuksen oppimissuunnitelma yhdessä huoltajien kanssa. Suunnitelma laaditaan siten, että lapsella on myös mahdollisuus tuoda omat ajatuksensa ja toiveensa esiin.

CHILD'S PRE-SCHOOL LEARNING PLAN (PLP)

LAPSEN ESIOPETUKSEN OPPIMISSUUNNITELMA

Lapsen henkilötiedot PERSONAL INFORMATION OF THE CHILD

Sukunimi LAST NAME	Etunimi FIRST NAME	Syntymäaika DATE OF BIRTH
Osoite ADDRESS		
Esiopetusyksikkö/koulu PRE-SCHOOL / SCHOOL	Ryhmä/luokka GROUP / CLASS	
Äidinkieli MOTHER TONGUE	Kodin kieliympäristö HOME LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT	

Vanhemmat / huoltajat PARENTS / GUARDIANS

☐ yhteishuoltajuus (molempien vanhempien yhteystiedot) JOINT CUSTODY ☐ yksinhuoltajuus SINGLE PARENTHOOD

Huoltajan sukunimi GUARDIAN'S LAST NAME	Huoltajan etunimi FIRST NAME	Puhelin TELEPHONE
Osoite, jos eri kuin lapsen ADDRESS IF DIFFERENT FROM THE CHILD		

Huoltajan sukunimi GUARDIAN'S LAST NAME	Huoltajan etunimi FIRST NAME	Puhelin TELEPHONE
Osoite, jos eri kuin lapsen ADDRESS, IF DIFFERENT FROM CHILD		

Lapsen varhaiskasvatushistoria

CHILD'S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION HISTORY

Tehdyt päätökset ja aikaisemmat suunnitelmat

DECISIONS MADE AND PREVIOUS PLANS

Opettajat / TEACHERS

Lastentarhanopettaja/luokanopettaja KINDERGARTEN TEACHER / CLASS TEACHER	Puhelin TELEPHONE
Varhaiskasvatuksen erityisopettaja/erityisopettaja/erityisluokanopettaja SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER / SPECIAL NEEDS TEACHER	Puhelin TELEPHONE
Päiväkodin johtaja/koulun rehtori KINDERGARTEN LEADER / SCHOOL PRINCIPAL	Puhelin TELEPHONE

[redacted]

SALASSA PIDETTÄVÄ

Lapsen omat ajatukset ja toiveet esiopetusvuodelle
(kotona tai esiopetuksessa esiin nousseet asiat)

THE CHILD'S OWN THOUGHTS AND WISHES FOR THE PRE-SCHOOL YEAR
(ISSUES RAISED AT HOME OR IN PRE-SCHOOL)

Lapsi oppijana CHILD AS A LEARNER
(mm. työskentelytaidot, itseohjautuvuus, oman toiminnan ohjaus, keskittyminen, minäkuva)
SELF CONCEPT
WORKING SKILLS, SELF CONTROL, INDEPENDENT WORKING SKILLS, CONCENTRATION

KUVAUS LAPSESTA – VAHVUUDET JA TUEN TARPEET DESCRIPTION OF THE CHILD – STRENGTHS AND SUPPORT NEEDS	
tavoitteet OBJECTIVES	menetelmät METHODS
KEVÄÄN TILANNE SPRING TIME - SITUATION	

Sosioemotionaaliset taidot SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS
(mm. tunne-elämän taidot, vuorovaikutustaidot, kaveritaidot, yhteistoiminta ryhmässä)
EMOTIONAL SKILLS, INTERPERSONAL SKILLS, HOW TO MAKE FRIENDS, WORKING IN GROUP

KUVAUS LAPSESTA – VAHVUUDET JA TUEN TARPEET DESCRIPTION OF THE CHILD – STRENGTHS AND SUPPORT NEEDS	
tavoitteet OBJECTIVES	menetelmät METHODS
KEVÄÄN TILANNE SPRING TIME - SITUATION	

Hahmottaminen ja motoriikka PERCEPTION AND MOTOR SKILLS

KUVAUS LAPSESTA – VAHVUUDET JA TUEN TARPEET DESCRIPTION OF THE CHILD - STRENGTHS AND SUPPORT NEEDS	
tavoitteet OBJECTIVES	menetelmät METHODS
KEVÄÄN TILANNE SPRING TIME - SITUATION	

LANGUAGE SKILLS FINNISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE
Kielelliset valmiudet (Huom! suomi toisena kielenä, oma äidinkieli) MOTHER TONGUAGE

KUVAUS LAPSESTA – VAHVUUDET JA TUEN TARPEET DESCRIPTON OF THE CHILD - STRENGTHS AND SUPPORT NEEDS	
tavoitteet OBJECTIVES	menetelmät METHODS
KEVÄÄN TILANNE SPRING TIME - SITUATION	

Matemaattiset valmiudet MATHEMATICAL SKILLS

KUVAUS LAPSESTA – VAHVUUDET JA TUEN TARPEET DESCRIPTON OF THE CHILD - STRENGTHS AND SUPPORT NEEDS	
tavoitteet OBJECTIVES	menetelmät METHODS
KEVÄÄN TILANNE SPRING TIME - SITUATION	

Liitteet (esim. Eskarin arki, havainnointilomake, osa C)

APPENDICES e.g.
- OUR PRE-SCHOOL DAY
- OBSERVATION FORM, PART C

Huoltajien ja eskarin henkilökunnan terveiset koululle

GUARDIANS AND PRE-SCHOOL STAFS NOTES TO THE SCHOOL.

REVIEWING THE LEARNING PLAN AND TIME
Oppimissuunnitelman tarkistaminen ja ajankohta

Tarkistamisajankohta: TIME
Koollekutsuja: CONVENER

LEARNING PLAN SHALL BE NOTIFIED
Oppimissuunnitelma annetaan tiedoksi

Nimi: NAME	Tehtävä: TASK

Allekirjoitukset SIGNATURES

[redacted] ____/____/201____

THIS LEARNING PLAN SERVES AS A TOOL FOR COMMUNICATION TO THE
Tämä oppimissuunnitelma toimii tiedonsiirron välineenä kouluun. SCHOOL

	syksy: AUTUMN	kevät: SPRING
huoltajat GUARDIANS		
opettajat TEACHERS		
muut OTHER		

APPROVAL OF THE KINDERGARTEN LEADER / PRINCIPAL
Päiväkodin johtajan/rehtorin hyväksyntä

Pvm DATE

APPENDIX 1

LIITE 1 Lapsen esiopetuksen suunnitelmaan

~~THE~~ FOR CONVERSATION AT HOME WITH THE CHILD AND PARENTS

Lapsen ja vanhempien kotona käytävää keskustelua varten

LAPSEN OMA OSIO **(Eskarilaista voi haastatella kotona tai päiväkodissa)** THE CHILD'S OWN SECTION	Mistä asioista pidän ja mistä olen kiinnostunut WHAT THINGS DO YOU LIKE AND WHAT ARE YOU INTERESTED IN ?
	Mistä asioista en pidä ja mitkä asiat jännittävät tai pelottavat WHAT THINGS I DONIT LIKE? WHICH THINGS ARE EXCITING OR SCARY?
	Missä olen hyvä WHAT THINGS I AM GOOD AT ?
	Mitä haluaisin opetella esiopetuksessa WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO LEARN IN PRE-SCHOOL?
VANHEMPIEN OMA OSIO PARENT'S OWN SECTION	Alleviivatkaa lastanne parhaiten kuvaavia piirteitä DESCRIBE YOUR CHILD Hyväntuulinen HAPPY; Luottavainen TRUSTING; Ujo SHY Omatoiminen; Herkkä; Rauhallinen CALM Rohkea BRAVE; Voimakastahtoinen STRONG-WILLED; Utelias CURIOUS Lyhytjännitteinen; Arka SENSITIVE; Sinnikäs PERSISTENT Vilkas LIVELY; Huomionhaluinen; Toisen huomioon ottava Vetäytyvä; Harkitseva; Aktiivinen ACTIVE Passiivinen PASSIVE; Innostuva EXCITABLE; Muu, mikä _____ SOMETHING ELSE
VANHEMPIEN TOIVEITA JA AJATUKSIA ESIOPETUSVUODELLE GUARDIAN'S WISHES AND THOUGHTS FOR THE PRE-SCHOOL YEAR	

Appendix 5

Examples of Finnish Eskarin arki-observation form

MOTORSKILLS (gross/fine), VISUAL MOTOR SKILLS AND AWARENESS

Scale 1-10

Is happy to be involved in sports and games

Performs basic forms of exercise (crawling, twisting, ticking, walking, running)

Identifies and names parts of his body

Jumps on one leg (attention stays in place)

Throws and catches the ball (attention to the forward movements of the body, catches the ball from the side)

Masters scissor grip and can cut (circle, wavy line successfully)

Draw basic shapes (triangle, square, cross)

Reproduces letters

Draws a human figure

Assembles 15-20 pieces of a puzzle (without platform, shapes)

Can weave (eg beads)

Knows how to draw from dot to dot from a model

Can assemble block structures according to a model (stairs with 3 steps)

Can assemble Legos without a model, according to oral instructions

DAILY FUNCTIONS Scale 1-10

Dresses and undresses himself independently

Takes care of her clothes in the hanger

Opens and closes zippers, buttons, etc.

Eating

Behaves appropriately in dining situations

Uses cutlery properly

Eat varied (food composition, whether odours affect, whether there is a difference between coarse / fine-grained food)

Cleanliness

Takes care of her own belongings

Takes things back in place after work

Manages toilet visits

Adopts the rhythm of the day

Moves flexibly from one activity to another

Happy to participate in kindergarten activities (eg. free play vs. guided situation)

LANGUAGE SKILLS Scale 1-10

Is happy to be involved in linguistic games

Listens to fairy tales in group situations and remembers what she hears

Tells and describes events freely

Understands and works according to instructions in group situations (at least 3-part instruction)

Writes own name

Rhymes (= invents final consonant words for rhymes)

Rhythms words according to syllable divisions

Understands (front, back, next, top, bottom)

Can compare features (larger, largest)

Hears and recognizes the initial sounds of words

Identify time-related concepts (times of day, yesterday, today, tomorrow)

Can list given words (at least four) or sentences of 5-6 words

Recognises letters (numbers ___)

Is interested in learning to read

Concludes the course of events from a series of images and tells about it according to the reading direction (a series of at least four images, e.g. a cartoon)

Appendix 6

National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education in Finland (part of it)

Rich world of the language

General objectives of instruction linked to the entity

The mission of pre-primary education is to promote children's linguistic development and interactive skills and to strengthen their interest in languages and cultures. The development of linguistic awareness in children is promoted by playing with language and rhymes and versatile familiarisation with spoken and written language. Children's developing reading and writing skills are supported through play and functional exercises. Teaching and learning environments are planned so that they include multiple opportunities for children to observe, explore and experiment with spoken and written language and to expand their vocabulary. In addition to the language of instruction, observations are also made of other languages in pre-primary education. It is important that children whose mother tongue differs from the language of pre-primary education are strongly supported in the development of the language of instruction while experiencing that the language spoken at their homes is important and valuable.

Mathematical skills and implementing technology and environmental education

General objectives of instruction linked to the entity

Pre-primary education strengthens the foundation for the development of children's mathematical thinking and learning of mathematics. Children are guided to pay attention to the mathematics they come across in their daily lives and environment. The instruction provides opportunities for developing children's understanding of the concept of numbers, change and time, as well as plane and space and measurement skills. The goal of the instruction is to provide joy of invention and learning for children in different phases of their mathematical thinking.

The activities include making observations on nature. The development of children's sensitivity to the environment and their relationship with nature is supported by offering children experiences of moving in nature and exploring it. Children are also guided to observe technology in the environment and to experiment and find their own solutions.

In the instruction, children become familiar with an enquiry-based approach. Children are encouraged to ask questions and find explanations together. Children learn to compare, classify and organise the information acquired

thorough observations or measurements. They are encouraged to draw conclusions, come up with solutions to everyday problems, and try out the solutions. Documentation by different devices and presentation of findings through various methods is practised in the instruction.

More detailed objectives

Children are encouraged to consider and describe their mathematical observations in various daily situations. The teacher helps the children through verbal modelling. The children practise presenting their findings. They can use images as well as different equipment in doing this. The activities are planned so that they include multiple opportunities to classify, compare and rank different things and objects and to discover and produce regularities. Games and tasks that develop memory are included in the instruction. Children are also encouraged to decipher and find solutions to problem solving assignments connected to their operating environment.

The development of the concept of numbers is supported diversely through playing and working. Children are encouraged to perceive numbers and amounts in their environment and to join them to numeral words in writing and numeric symbols as permitted by their skills. Numbers and amounts are compared and changes in these are studied by inventing practical examples. Particular attention is paid to developing children’s number sequencing skills and their naming.

Different exercises are used to support children’s perception of plane and space. Children are encouraged to examine and experiment with two- and three-dimensionality and to learn concepts of location and relation, such as in front of, above and every second, for instance through games involving physical activities. In order to strengthen children’s geometric thinking, opportunities for building, arts and crafts and clay modelling are arranged for them. With the guidance of their teacher, children familiarise themselves with the shapes found in their surroundings and practise identifying them.

Measuring with one’s body and different tools are experimented within pre-primary education. Concepts of time, such as sometimes, yesterday and in the morning, are practised. The concept of chronological order is considered together, for example by perceiving different times of day.

Among other things, play, games and stories as well as information and communication technology are utilised in the instruction.

I grow and develop

Physical activity, food, consumer skills, health and safety

General objectives of instruction linked to the entity

Children gather versatile experiences of physical exercise and will begin to understand the link between physical activity and health and well-being. The education offers possibilities for the development of children's fundamental movement skills and social skills. Particular attention is paid to developing perceptual motor skills significant for the general learning prerequisites of children. Children are familiarised with healthy food and its significance is considered together with them. Children are guided towards moderation as consumers. Factors connected to health are considered and children's capabilities for taking care of their health are supported in the instruction. Children receive information on moving safely in their immediate environment and in the learning environments of pre-primary education.

Finnish National Board of Education (2016) *National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education.*

Appendix 7

Research Questions: Teachers

1. What does the phrase “ready for school” bring to your mind?
2. What do you consider is *the outcome* of the year 2 for children? (E.g. what are the children expected to learn specifically during that year).
3. What are your thoughts about your current group of students and their readiness for school (and move to Year 3)?
4. How does the current National Curriculum support your pedagogy? E.g. do you feel it is providing everything and helping the children move on (E.g. child development vs. child’s capabilities to achieve certain learning objectives/targets, age appropriateness, pedagogy, Ofsted or your school program), something else?
5. What kind of tools do you use to evaluate children’s learning? Can you give an example(s) (tests)? Who ‘dictates’ what kind of tests you use?
6. According to the new National Curriculum: ***‘Teachers can develop exciting and stimulating lessons to promote the development of pupils’ knowledge, understanding and skills as part of the wider school curriculum’*** (DfE, 2013). Do you think you are able to do this in your classroom/school?
    - **What kind of limitations?** E.g. Ofsted, learning objectives, SAT’s, something else? E.g. expectations of the particular levels of achievement.

- **If able, how?** E.g. What kind of learning activities do you use in the classroom (e.g. opportunities for cross curricula approach, learning through play, school trips)? **OUTDOOR LEARNING**

7. In what extent the children have opportunities to make independent choices about their own learning experiences (100% max total)?

A) Child-selected activities _____%/day/week.

B) Teacher-directed whole class activities _____%/day/week.

C) You decide things together with the children _____%/day/week.

8. How important –in your opinion- is learning through play? Are you combining play-based learning with intentional teaching? How? (e.g. props and playthings or outdoor learning)

Prompts used during interviews

What do you mean by…? Tell me more about… Repetition or restatement of a phrase

Appendix 8

Short Questionnaire (bring with you for the interview, please)

1. Are you? Female ☐ Male ☐

2. What is your highest qualification?

_____

3. Whilst studying, did you learn about child development theories (e.g. Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky, Froebel)?

Yes ☐ ☐ No

4. Which ones?

_____

5. What extend (years/credits)?_____

6. Did any coursework cover *play in education or learning through play* during your teacher education? Yes ☐ No ☐

7. How long have you been teaching?

NQT year ☐ 1 - 2 years ☐ 3 - 5 years ☐

6 - 10 years ☐ Over 10 years ☐

8. How many children are there in your current year group? _____

9. How many teachers are there totally in your class? _____

Thank you, I appreciate your giving time to this study.

Päivi Valtonen

Appendix 9

EA2

Ethical Approval Form:
Human Research Projects

Please word-process this form. Handwritten applications will not be accepted.

UNIVERSITY OF LINCOLN

This form must be completed for each piece of research activity conducted by academics, graduate students and undergraduates. The completed form must be approved by the School of Education Research Ethics Committee.

Please complete all sections. If a section is not applicable, write N/A.

1 Name of researcher	Paivi Hannele Valtonen **School of Education, College of Social Science, University of Lincoln, England**
2 Position in the University	PhD Candidate
3 Role in relation to this research	Primary investigator
4 Title of the research project	A Comparative Cross-National Study of Teachers' Pedagogical Thinking about Six-Year-Old Children's School Readiness in Finland and England
5 Brief statement of your main research question	To critically analyse teacher's pedagogy and children's drawings in order to identify factors for school readiness.
6 Brief description of the project	This research will develop as a comparative study and therefore acknowledge the practices in alternative educational dimensions. These dimensions will include comparative elements: e.g. curricula, school readiness, pedagogy, child development theories, learning environments and government policies pertinent for both countries. The proposed research is likely to add knowledge and understanding of contemporary childhood dimensions to the early childhood/primary school discipline. **Aims and Objectives:** Interviewing teachers will expose the pedagogy in use and how to interpret it cross-nationally. The children's drawings will help me to observe if the children are better off with their early educational experiences. When analysing conclusions from the children's drawings and the teacher's interviews I am able to reveal conceptual frameworks between the children's school readiness and pedagogy. Therefore the aim is to *critically analyse teacher's pedagogy and children's drawings in order to identify factors for school readiness.* **Teachers:** ✓ To critically analyse existing curricula and what supports the decision a teacher makes to apply specific pedagogy (role of the teacher). ✓ To compare the children's school readiness through Controlled Drawing Activity (CDA). ✓ To make recommendations to improve the curriculum and the practice of education and to promote school readiness. I am able to carry out required elements as I have an insight into different cultural educational settings within Finland and England and speak both languages fluently. In addition, this research will make an interesting and valuable comparison as very few such studies appear to have been

1

	conducted to gather information from the educational settings between these two countries. **Methodology:** The research will take an empirical approach using mixed methods (Mukherji and Albon, 2012) involving Finnish and English children. **Teachers:** Data will be collected by *semi-structured interviews* as individuals. The conversations are conducted face to face and video/audio taped. Before the interview the teachers fill in *a short questionnaire.* **Children:** Data will be collected by completing *the drawing task in a group context* (2-4 children). The activity is called the Controlled Drawing Observation (Krogh, 1978). The activity (CDO) is intended to find out common aspects of school readiness among the children aged 6 years-old. (Attachment 1) **Approximate start date:** April 2016 (Finland) **Anticipated end date:** May 2016 (Finland) **Approximate start date:** June 2016 (England) **Anticipated end date:** July 2016 (England)
7 Name and contact details of the Principal Investigator (if not you) or supervisor (if a student)	Päivi Valtonen, [illegible], Goxhill, DN19 7JZ, England **Email address:** [illegible]students.lincoln.ac.uk **Telephone:** [illegible] **Supervisor:** Dr Carol Callinan **Telephone:** [illegible] **E-mail address:** CCallinan@lincoln.ac.uk
8 Names of other researchers or student investigators involved	N/A
9 Location(s) at which this project is to be carried out	Teacher's semi-structured interviews and children's Controlled Drawing Observation activity (Krogh, 1978) will take place in Southern Finland ([illegible]) April – May 2016 and Northeast England ([illegible]) June – July 2016. My reasons for selecting these cities are primarily physical and limited financial assets. The primary location will be the participant's educational setting during the pre/school day. A familiar setting will help the participants feel comfortable and secure. Furthermore the children are working in small groups together with their classmates. This should help the children feel even safer. In addition, the children are able to be active and choose convenient time for themselves together with the class teacher and the lesson planning. The first permission will be sought from the head teacher. The participants will be the six-year-old children in this pre/school. Teacher's individual interviews will take place after the pre/school day.

10 Statement of the ethical issues involved and how they are to be addressed, including discussion of the potential risks of harm to both project participants and researchers **This should include:** • **an assessment of the vulnerability of the participants and researchers** • **the manner and extent to which the research might not honour principles of respect, beneficence and justice** • **concerns relating to the relationships of power between the researcher(s) and those participating in or affected by the research**	Parent(s)/carer(s) are a child's main educators. Together with the parent(s)/carer(s) the child will make his or her *first decision* if s/he wants to take part in this project. Research Information Letter and Parental Informed Consent Form will inform parents/carers about the research process. The form needs parent's/carer's signature stating they have understood the research procedure. The Child Informed Consent Form includes the same information but aimed at children. I have done my best to explain formal words with plain English aimed for children. I will include a period of familiarisation with the child participants to ensure their emotional comfort e.g. before the actual interview days I will visit the setting, introduce myself and stay over to get to know the children better. The child participants are given pseudonym names. This will ensure confidentiality and anonymity during the presentation of findings. Before the drawing activity I will recap and remind the child of his/her rights (e.g. confidentiality and anonymity, opting out during the research process etc.). Furthermore, I will remind the child participants that they are able to stop/leave at any time when they want to, or have a break during the drawing process. The participants are informed about the last withdrawal date, which is the 31st August 2016. After this date I will be writing up my research and therefore will not be able to remove any interviews/drawings from the final work. The Child Informed Consent Form includes *further* information about the research process. Furthermore, the researcher ensures that participants (children/teachers) have the right to withdraw from the research (without fear of being penalised). In this case the parents/carers/teachers need to handle the withdrawals which will be achieved through e-mailing the researcher (parents/carers signature in Research Information Letter and Parental Informed Consent Form to understand this as their responsibility). The researcher strongly believes that this is the appropriate way as the parents know their child the best. Furthermore as this research is done in two different countries, *the only efficient, fastest and the most affordable information transformation is by emailing.* The collected data will be stored on a password protected computer, of which only the researcher has knowledge off, and that the computer will be kept in locked premises. Data is stored appropriately (handling and storage time (> 8 years)). After this time the data is deleted. The researcher will ensure the participant's well-being during the Controlled Drawing Observation (Krogh, 1978) group (2-4) activity. One of them being the interview location (school) is a familiar setting and the children can work in the familiar group. The drawings will help the child to relax and are expected to provide additional aspects into school readiness. In addition, the principle of justice is acknowledged by the researcher and she will treat all participants as fair as possible. The final dissertation resulting from this project will be available through the University of Lincoln (England), Library. As a practitioner and teacher myself I am aware of the issues of power relationship between the interviewer and the child participant. One way of 'giving up' the power (or some of it) is to let participants choose the convenient time for them. The Parental Informed Consent Form will describe the methods (drawing) and the data gathering equipment. I will send out the Parents' Consent Form first. This will then inform me, how many of the Children's Consent Form I will need. The consent forms will be signed and returned back to the school. In the case of a child talking about the risk of someone being harmed I would talk with the child first on what could be done to help. Traditionally, the schools have very strict policy according to this kind of issues. If any further concerns arise I will bring the matter to the head teacher/teaching staff and let them resolve it. If in doubt I will follow up the School's Safeguarding Policy and contact school's head teacher/SENCO (School's Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator).

	The researcher believes there are not any particular risks or dilemmas involved as a result of the drawings or methodology. Through my early childhood education, work experience and ethics I am able to recognise and minimise the possible risk of harm or injustice to the child participants. According to Alderson (2004, p.110) "Modern ethics fit and encourage modern research methods with children as real participants".
11 Does this research involve children and/or young people?	**Yes X** **No** ☐ **If yes, please explain (a) how you have obtained or will obtain the appropriate permissions to work with these people (E.g., DBS check in the UK), and (b) your principles for their ethical engagement. If yes, please explain (a) how you have obtained or will obtain the appropriate permissions to work with these people (E.g., DBS check in the UK), and (b) your principles for their ethical engagement.** **Safety and safeguarding issues** Currently I work (part time basis) as a supply teacher and therefore I am required to have an up to date **Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS).** I have also subscribed to *an updated online service*, https://secure.crbonline.gov.uk/crsc/subscriber (Welcome to the Update Service). "Subscribing to this service reduces the need to apply for multiple Certificates when you move from one job to another in the same workforce or when a recheck is required.)" . My Certificate number is: [redacted]. Please check as required (attachment). - I have also attached the Finnish DBS (attachment). - Latest 'addition' is 'the Childcare Questionnaire' which is also required if working with children or vulnerable adults (attachment). - I have also completed 'Introduction to Safeguarding Children', Level 1, 20th March 2013 (attachment). **Ethical engagement** The children's rights are listed under '3 Ps' (United Nations, 1989). By following these rights (e.g. children being well informed, listened carefully to their own views and mutual respect and justice), I believe so called 'rights based research' will protect the child participants as well as the researcher. Conducting this research the researcher does not recognise or gain any benefits (Alderson, 2004). Additionally the researcher aims to work towards ethical, honest and mutually respectful relationships e.g. recognising and moving beyond typical stereotypes of children and embracing ethical status of children as active participants.

Ethical approval from other bodies

12 Does this research require approval from an external body?	**Yes X** **No** ☐ **If yes, please state which body:** In Finland the approval is gained from the external body, in this case from City of Tampere (Tampereen kaupunki). **Contact person**: [redacted] E-mail: [redacted] **All approvals are done electronically.**

	http://www.tampere.fi/tampereinfo/sanoinjakuvio/tutkimuksetjajulkaisut/tutkimukset.html After the approval, the Committee will inform the researcher how to contact the pre-school settings.
13 Has ethical approval already been obtained from that body? Please note that such approvals must be obtained before the project begins.	**Yes** **X** **(Please append documentary evidence to this form.)** **No** ☐ **(If no, please explain why below.)** **The Ethics Committee Approval Form has been gained from the City of Tampere, January 20th 2016** (attachment).

APPLICANT SIGNATURE

I hereby request that the School of Education Research Ethics Committee review this application for the research as described above, and reply with a decision about its approval on ethical grounds.

I certify that I have read the University's Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Humans and Other Animals (which can be found online here:
http://visit.lincoln.ac.uk/C11/C8/ResearchEthicsPolicy/Document%20Library/Research%20Ethics%20Policy.pdf).

Päivi Valtonen 20.1.2016

Applicant signature **Date**

Päivi Valtonen

Print name

FOR STUDENT APPLICATIONS ONLY
Academic Support for Ethics

Academic support must be sought from your mentor prior to submitting this form to the School of Education Research Ethics Committee.

Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught applicants should obtain approval from their tutor or an academic member of staff nominated by the Department.

Postgraduate Research applicants should obtain approval from their Director of Studies.

I (the undersigned) support this application for ethical approval.

25th January 2016

5

Academic / Director of Studies signature

Date

Dr Carol Callinan

Print name

For completion by the Chair of the School of Education Research Ethics Committee

Please select ONE of A, B, C or D below.

☒ **A. The School of Education Research Committee gives ethical approval to this research.**

☐ **B. The School of Education Research Committee gives *conditional* ethical approval to this research.**

14 Please state the condition (including the date by which the condition must be satisfied, if applicable).	

☐ **C. The School of Education Research Committee cannot give ethical approval to this research but refers the application to the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee for higher level consideration.**

15 Please state the reason.	

☐ **D. The School of Education Research Committee cannot give ethical approval to this research and recommends that the research should *not* proceed.**

16 Please state the reason.	

Signature of Chair of School of Education Research Committee (or nominee)

25/01/2016

Signed **Date**

7

Appendix 10

Research Information Letter for Teachers

Working Title: Children's School Readiness in Finland and England

Dear Year 2 Teacher,

I am a PhD student at the Lincoln University Faculty of Education. I would like to invite you to participate in research I am undertaking as part of my studies. The purpose of my research is to find out how children's school readiness is viewed by teachers' and how it compares between Finland and England.

If you agree to participate, this will involve being interviewed once. The full set of questions are given to you before the interview. Furthermore, you are invited to fill in a short questionnaire prior to the interview.

The interview will explore your experiences and understanding of children's learning within a school environment. It is expected that the interview will last no longer than 30 minutes. I can undertake the interview in your school, during or after the school day. I would like to audio tape the interview so I can transcribe it later.

All information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality including your *confidentiality and anonymity*. I will do my very best to protect you from this by removing any identifying information, e.g. your personal details for example, your name. Furthermore, you will not be identified or presented in any identifiable form. I want to assure you that the collected data will be stored on a password protected computer, of which only I have knowledge off, and that the computer will be kept in locked premises. Data is stored appropriately (handling and storage time [> 8 years]) and after that deleted. However, information about the project, including interview data, will be shared with my PhD supervisor and other appropriate staff at the University of Lincoln.

As a participant you have a right to withhold information. Please note that during the interview process you are able to withdraw, stop or leave at any time should you need to, or have a break during the interview process. Even after the interview is completed you have the right to withdraw from the project at any time by e-mailing me at the following address: 13486043@students.lincoln.ac.uk. If you decide to withdraw it will not have any negative impact on you. Please note that the withdrawal process for this project has to happen before 31st May 20xx. After 31st May 20xx I will be at the point of writing up my research and therefore

will not be able to remove possible quotations from the final work. The research has been approved by the University's Departmental Ethics Committee. The final thesis resulting from this project will be available through the University of Lincoln Library during 2020.

Prior, during or after your participation you can contact me if required by e-mail. You can also contact my PhD supervisor, Dr Carol Callinan, e-mail: CCallinan@lincoln.ac.uk.

I appreciate you giving time to this study.

Thank you,

Päivi Valtonen

Päivi Valtonen

Please sign below, cut and bring back on the interview day.

 _

Informed Consent Form for Teachers

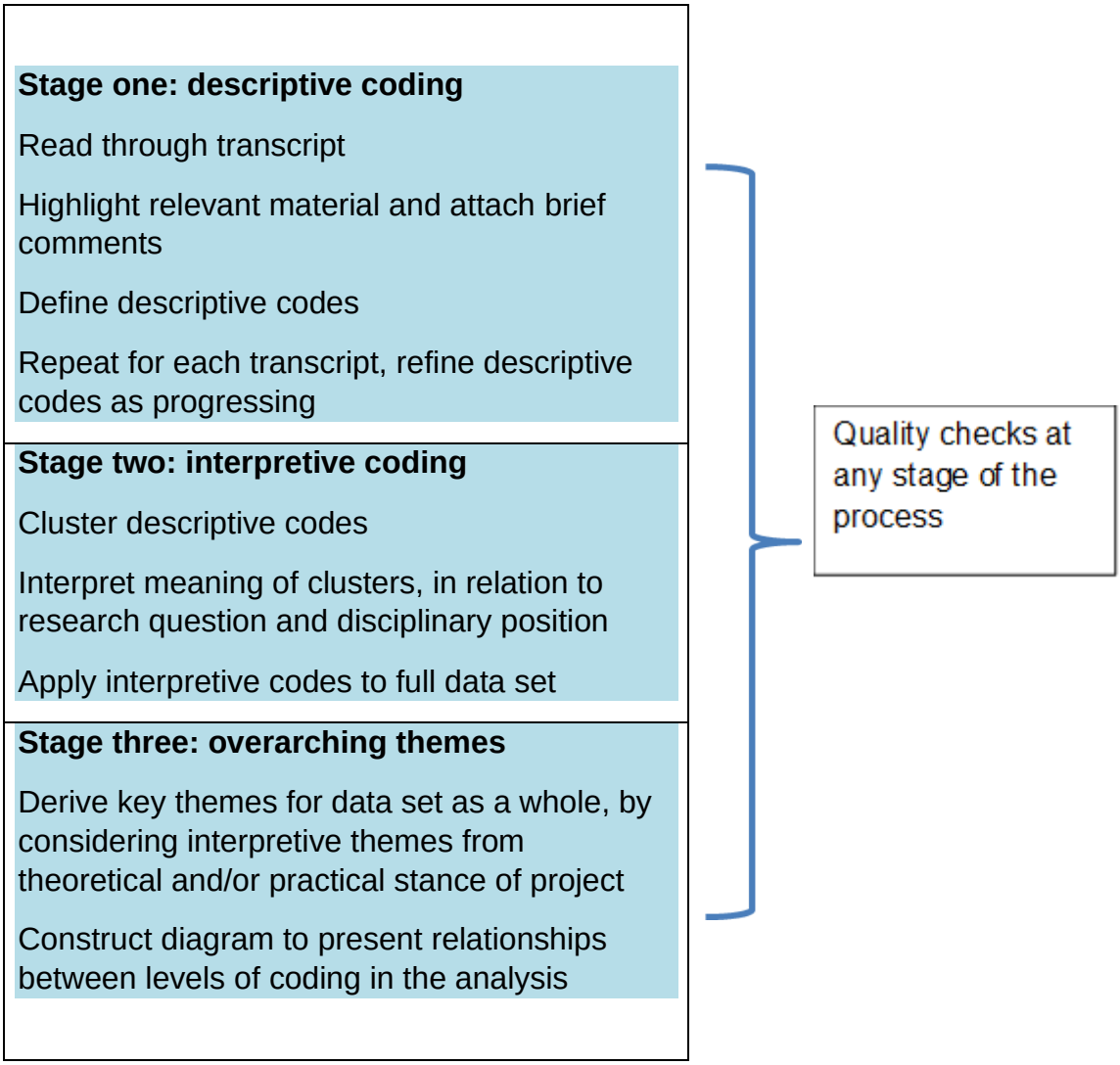
- I have read and understood the information letter concerning this research.
- I would like to participate in the PhD project outlined above.
- I understand that if I want to withdraw from the project, I need to e-mail the researcher before 31.9.20___.

Teacher's signature _____

Print name _____

School _____ Date _____ / _____

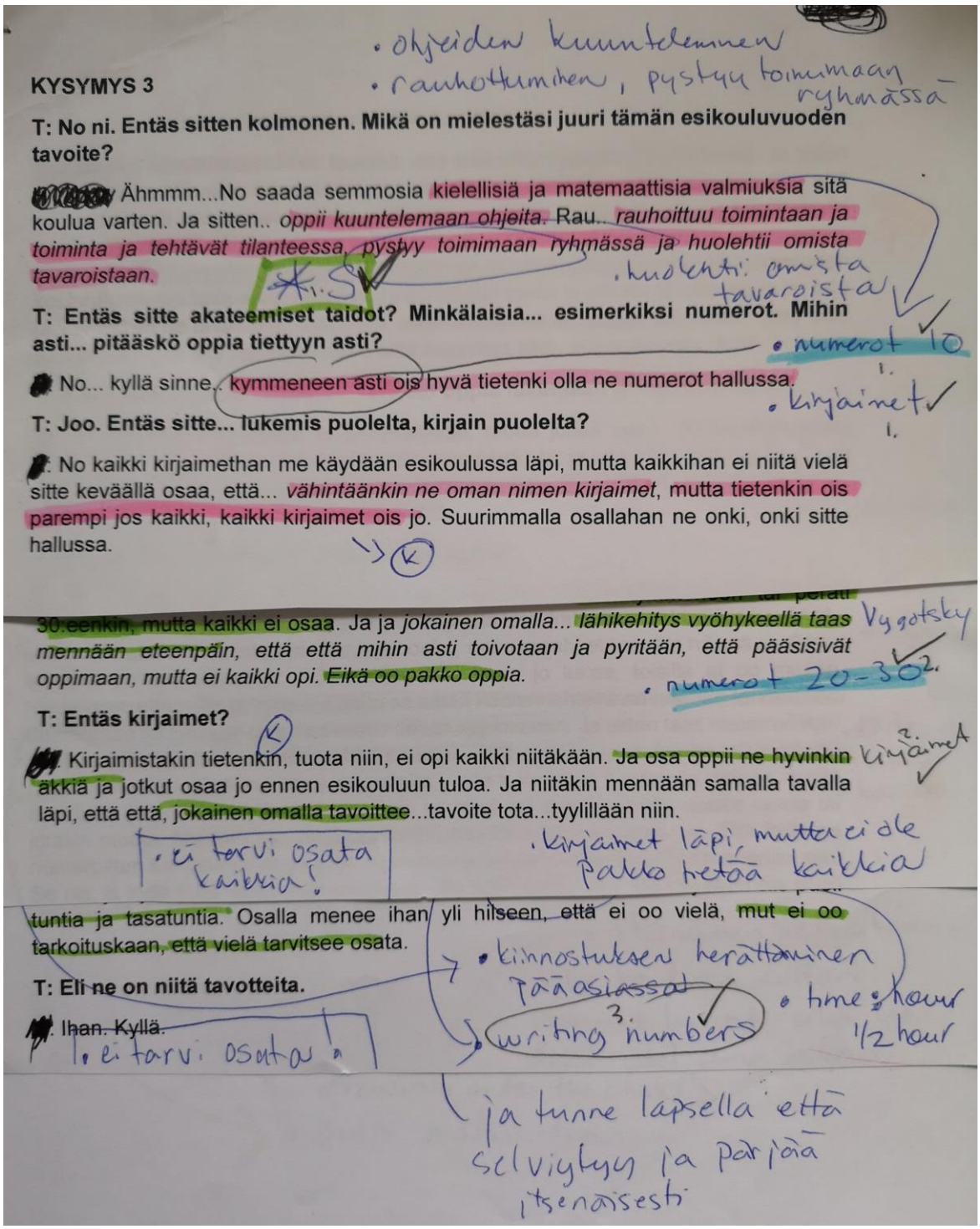
Appendix 11



Stages in the process of thematic analysis (King and Horrocks, 2011, 153)

Appendix 12

Examples of Annotated Interview Transcripts



KYSYMYS 3

• ohjeiden kuuntelemnen
• rauhoittuminen, pystyy toimimaan ryhmässä

T: No ni. Entäs sitten kolmonen. Mikä on mielestäsi juuri tämän esikouluvuoden tavoite?

Ähmmm...No saada semmosia kielellisiä ja matemaattisia valmiuksia sitä koulua varten. Ja sitten.. *oppii kuuntelemaan ohjeita.* Rau.. *rauhoittuu toimintaan ja toiminta ja tehtävät tilanteessa, pystyy toimimaan ryhmässä ja huolehtii omista tavaroistaan.*

• huolehtii omista tavaroista

T: Entäs sitte akateemiset taidot? Minkälaisia... esimerkiksi numerot. Mihin asti... pitääskö oppia tiettyyn asti?

• numerot 10

No... kyllä sinne.. kymmeneen asti ois hyvä tietenki olla ne numerot hallussa.

• kirjaimet

T: Joo. Entäs sitte... lukemis puolelta, kirjain puolelta?

No kaikki kirjaimethan me käydään esikoulussa läpi, mutta kaikkihan ei niitä vielä sitte keväällä osaa, että... *vähintäänkin ne oman nimen kirjaimet*, mutta tietenkin ois parempi jos kaikki, kaikki kirjaimet ois jo. Suurimmalla osallahan ne onki, onki sitte hallussa.

30.eenkin, mutta kaikki ei osaa. Ja ja *jokainen omalla... lähikehitys vyöhykeellä taas mennään eteenpäin, että että mihin asti toivotaan ja pyritään, että pääsisivät oppimaan, mutta ei kaikki opi. Eikä oo pakko oppia.*

Vygotsky

• numerot 20-30

T: Entäs kirjaimet?

Kirjaimistakin tietenkin, tuota niin, ei opi kaikki niitäkään. Ja osa oppii ne hyvinkin äkkiä ja jotkut osaa jo ennen esikouluun tuloa. Ja niitäkin mennään samalla tavalla läpi, että että, jokainen omalla tavoittee...tavoite tota...tyylillään niin.

kirjaimet

• ei tarvi osata kaikkia!

• kirjaimet läpi, mutta ei ole pakko hetää kaikkia

tuntia ja tasatuntia. Osalla menee ihan yli hilseen, että ei oo vielä, mut ei oo tarkoituskaan, että vielä tarvitsee osata.

• kiinnostuksen herättäminen pääasiassa

• time: hour 1/2 hour

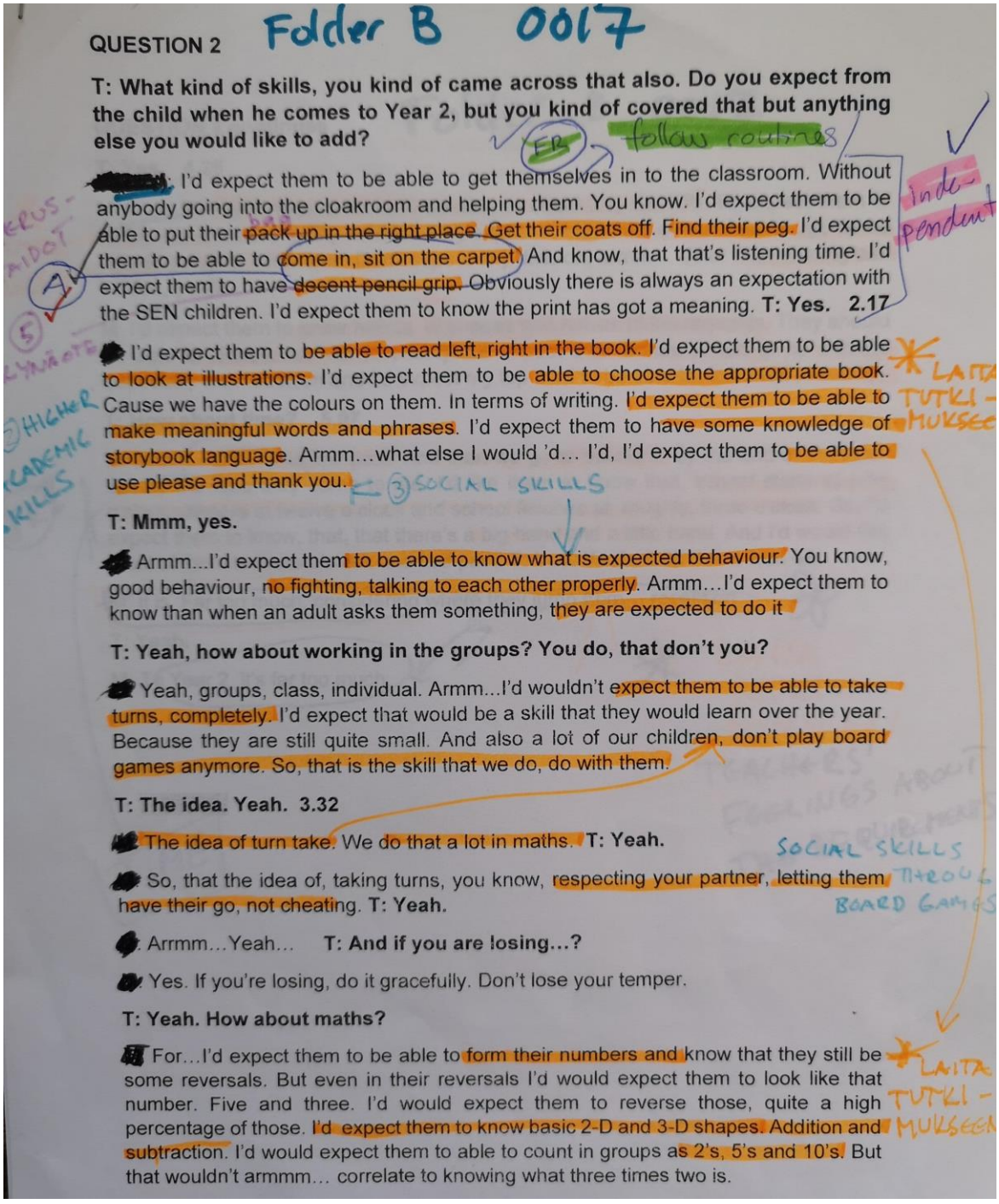
T: Eli ne on niitä tavotteita.

writing 3. numbers

Ihan. Kyllä.

• ei tarvi osata

ja tunne lapsella että selviytyy ja pärjää itsenäisesti



QUESTION 2 Folder B 0017

T: What kind of skills, you kind of came across that also. Do you expect from the child when he comes to Year 2, but you kind of covered that but anything else you would like to add?

[redacted]: I'd expect them to be able to get themselves in to the classroom. Without anybody going into the cloakroom and helping them. You know. I'd expect them to be able to put their pack up in the right place. Get their coats off. Find their peg. I'd expect them to be able to come in, sit on the carpet. And know, that that's listening time. I'd expect them to have decent pencil grip. Obviously there is always an expectation with the SEN children. I'd expect them to know the print has got a meaning. **T: Yes. 2.17**

[redacted]: I'd expect them to be able to read left, right in the book. I'd expect them to be able to look at illustrations. I'd expect them to be able to choose the appropriate book. Cause we have the colours on them. In terms of writing. I'd expect them to be able to make meaningful words and phrases. I'd expect them to have some knowledge of storybook language. Armm…what else I would 'd… I'd, I'd expect them to be able to use please and thank you.

T: Mmm, yes.

[redacted]: Armm...I'd expect them to be able to know what is expected behaviour. You know, good behaviour, no fighting, talking to each other properly. Armm…I'd expect them to know than when an adult asks them something, they are expected to do it

T: Yeah, how about working in the groups? You do, that don't you?

[redacted]: Yeah, groups, class, individual. Armm...I'd wouldn't expect them to be able to take turns, completely. I'd expect that would be a skill that they would learn over the year. Because they are still quite small. And also a lot of our children, don't play board games anymore. So, that is the skill that we do, do with them.

T: The idea. Yeah. 3.32

[redacted]: The idea of turn take. We do that a lot in maths. **T: Yeah.**

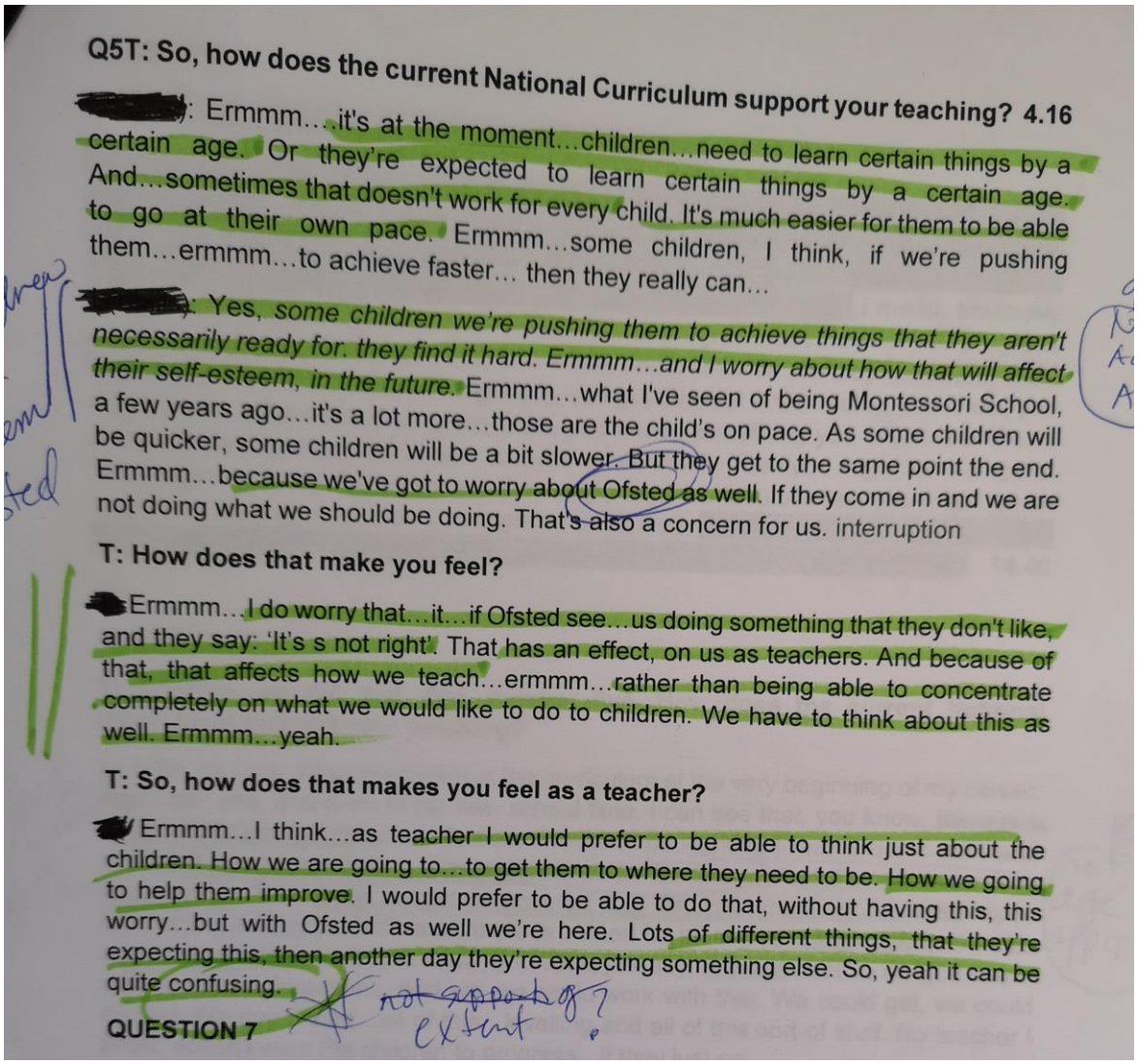
[redacted]: So, that the idea of, taking turns, you know, respecting your partner, letting them have their go, not cheating. **T: Yeah.**

[redacted]: Arrmm…Yeah… **T: And if you are losing…?**

[redacted]: Yes. If you're losing, do it gracefully. Don't lose your temper.

T: Yeah. How about maths?

[redacted]: For…I'd expect them to be able to form their numbers and know that they still be some reversals. But even in their reversals I'd would expect them to look like that number. Five and three. I'd would expect them to reverse those, quite a high percentage of those. I'd expect them to know basic 2-D and 3-D shapes. Addition and subtraction. I'd would expect them to able to count in groups as 2's, 5's and 10's. But that wouldn't armmm… correlate to knowing what three times two is.



Q5T: So, how does the current National Curriculum support your teaching? 4.16

[redacted]: Ermmm…it's at the moment…children…need to learn certain things by a certain age. Or they're expected to learn certain things by a certain age. And…sometimes that doesn't work for every child. It's much easier for them to be able to go at their own pace. Ermmm…some children, I think, if we're pushing them…ermmm…to achieve faster… then they really can…

[redacted]: Yes, *some children we're pushing them to achieve things that they aren't necessarily ready for. they find it hard. Ermmm…and I worry about how that will affect their self-esteem, in the future.* Ermmm…what I've seen of being Montessori School, a few years ago…it's a lot more…those are the child's on pace. As some children will be quicker, some children will be a bit slower. But they get to the same point the end. Ermmm…because we've got to worry about Ofsted as well. If they come in and we are not doing what we should be doing. That's also a concern for us. interruption

T: How does that make you feel?

Ermmm…I do worry that…it…if Ofsted see…us doing something that they don't like, and they say: 'It's s not right'. That has an effect, on us as teachers. And because of that, that affects how we teach…ermmm…rather than being able to concentrate completely on what we would like to do to children. We have to think about this as well. Ermmm…yeah.

T: So, how does that makes you feel as a teacher?

Ermmm…I think…as teacher I would prefer to be able to think just about the children. How we are going to…to get them to where they need to be. How we going to help them improve. I would prefer to be able to do that, without having this, this worry…but with Ofsted as well we're here. Lots of different things, that they're expecting this, then another day they're expecting something else. So, yeah it can be quite confusing.

QUESTION 7

Appendix 13

Table 16. *What kind of tools do you use to evaluate children's learning?*

Tools to evaluate learning	**English Teachers (N=17)**	**Tools to evaluate learning**	**Finnish Teachers (N=20)**
Category of Response	f	**Category of Response**	f
Teachers choose evaluation tools independently	4	Teachers choose evaluation tools independently	20
Evaluation tools decided together by school's head teacher/deputy head/subject leader/teacher	7	N/A	
Teachers are given The National Assessment Test (SAT) by Government	17	No national testing	
Daily observations	47	**Daily observations**	19
		Experiments, tasks (tests)	
Children are involved in evaluation e.g. peer and self-assessment	6	Parents and children are involved in evaluation and creating the child's Personal Learning Plan together with the teacher	20
Focus on academic skills	17	Focus on the all areas of child development	20

Above, constructed tables illustrate the analysed data and presents the results between England and Finland.